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A RED CLARK WESTERN

134

Fighting Blood

GORDON YOUNG

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by
Gordon Young

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CHAPTER I

Old Buck Wanders In

As YOUNG RED CLARK stepped into the lamplight of the wide-open Cross Bar Saloon doorway, a rangy broad-shouldered man with solemn eyes and drooping mustache was coming out.

The sad, solemn-faced man stopped short, fixing his eyes in a steady, almost startled, stare.

"My gosh! You, Red!"

"Yeah, leastwise I'd bet so," said Red, putting out his hand. "Why was you askin' in that I-seen-a-ghost sort o' voice, Buck? Hunh?"

"My gosh! I was jus' thinkin' about you, Red. An' I didn't have no suspicion you was in a thousand miles o' Tajola! Plum queer."

"You still look natural, Buck. Still look like you'd been hired for to enjoy folks's funerals."

"Don't be sarcastick. Le's git over here in the shadders where we can talk." He pulled lightly at Red's arm and they stepped inside. "Makes me feel sort o' superspicious, meetin' you this-away. What you doin' down in this here country?"

"Folks say jobs is plentiful."

"But a turrible country, Red. That is, for a peac'ble man like me."

"Yeah, I know. You're peac'ble like a drunk Injun off the reservation, you are!"

"I git misun'erstood. That's all."

"You're shore easy misunderstood thataway." Red knew that this sad, slow, solemn old Buck Waxman was one of the most unscarable human beings that ever squinted through smoke. "You an' me, Buck, onct we waded knee deep an' barefoot through a little hell fire, didn't we? An' if I rec'lect right, you toted me on your shoulder, part way."

"You don't rec'lect worth a damn. I like peace an' quiet."

"Then what're *you* doin', Buck, down in this hell-raisin' Tajola country?"

"Me, son, I'm usin' my gentle influonce!"

"You ain't got none!"

"Red! That ain't no nice way for to talk. I don't want to be down here in Tajola. But I can't help myself. My brother Bill, he's been ol' Monroe's foreman for near twenty year, so me——"

"You a friend o' old Monroe's, Buck?"

"He ain't got no friends, Red. He's jus' got him a pay roll."

"Shucks! No man gets you to ride for 'im if you don't like 'im."

"I ride for my brother. He's purt' near what you call a friend to ol' Monroe. Though folks wonder why. Now me, I try for to be allus what folks call the innercent bystander."

"Yeah, I know. You stand by a feller till pigs sprout wings, whether he's innocent 'r not!"

"Today," said old Buck, "I come to town for some grub. The sort you pour outa bottle. An' been loafin' here." With a backhanded lift of thumb across his shoulder, he added, "Whale of a poker game goin' on in there. That's what made me think o' you. Young red-headed kid in there losin' dollars like they was wormy beans."

"If he's losin', that's shore like me!"

"Yessir. About yore age. 'Minded me o' you. How'd you come to be here, Red?"

"Follered my nose."

"Smelt trouble, huh?" Old Buck shook his head reproachfully. "When did you come to town?"

" 'Bout an hour ago. Got me a room, had some supper, an' walked out for to see the sights."

"An o' course, sorta by instink, you make a bee line for this here Cross Bar Saloon. Careful folks, they don't hang round here much." Waxman shook his head warningly and added in a lowered tone, "Man named Hamel, he is the owner—owns the Cross Bar Saloon. He owns this here town of Tajola, too. Owns the sheriff. Owns

the Cross Bar cow outfit. An' he owns all the lumber there is in town for to make coffins with."

"You rouse my cur'osity."

"Now me, I got to go up the street a piece for to see a feller. Wanta come 'long an' keep in good comp'ny?"

"I'll wait."

"Then go 'long in an' watch that poker game. That young feller that made me think o' you is likely to come out without no pants on. I'll be right along back, pronto. You need my restrainin' influonce for to guide you, Red."

"Yeah. You an' bad whisky, they keep me from goin' to sleep in church an' suchlike unmannerly doin's."

Waxman gazed at him with mournful reproach.

"That ain't no nice way for to talk to an ol' man!" he said.

"You ain't no nice ol' man for a modest blushin' boy like me to talk to, neither."

Old Buck Waxman shook his head sadly. "I c'n jus' see that you're itchin' for to be scratched by trouble. I'll be right back, pronto. Then you an' me c'n have a talk."

He went off with a kind of hasty shambling, loose-jointed, sort of humble and lonesome-like. Red peered after him, grinning.

"Yessir," said Red to himself, "he's a queer ol' codger. Sees a lot an' says nothin' much. An' folks as take 'im for a fool 'ud step on a rattlesnake, barefoot! That there slow sad manner o' his has coaxed a lot o' bad men to get 'emselves buried. An' when ol' Buck's wanderin' round the range, lookin' sorta lonesome an' half lost, he's up to somethin.' "

CHAPTER II

Red Trims Some Trimmers

NEAR the back end of the bar a lamp was hung high so as to cast a funnel-shaped glow of yellow light down on the table where tall stacks of chips, much gold coin,

and a sprinkling of silver lay at the elbows of the players.

Red edged into the group that stood about the table and by slow squirming got into a good position to look on.

Six men were playing, four of them in shirt sleeves. Two were gamblers, pale-faced fellows, with slender, white fingers, and they wore their coats though the room was hot. One of the gamblers was middle-aged, with some gray hairs, but a black curled mustache, greasily waxed. He wore nice clothes and there was a gold watch chain, with a heavy charm dangling, on his vest. He wore rings that seemed to be set with diamonds. Anybody could tell that he thought himself handsome. The other gambler was young, lean, with low-lidded dark eyes, thin mouth, and long, supple fingers.

Red eyed the gamblers with instinctive dislike, looking at them closely. He, the son of a famous sheriff, had almost from babyhood learned a lot of things about gunmen, gamblers, rustlers; and he was recklessly unafraid of any and all dishonest men—just as his father, the sheriff, had been.

Two of the other players were full-grown cowboys, men rather; the sort, Red felt after a long shrewd stare, that he wouldn't care to have for friends.

He guessed at once that the man who was banking this game was Hamel, the Cross Bar owner—owner, too, of the lumber from which all coffins were made. Hamel was a big, dark, heavy man with lumpy jaws, something of a belly, and hard eyes. He looked well fed and cruel, tricky, self-confident; but, after the manner of saloon keepers, tried to appear affable and jolly.

Red stared with the most interest at the young fellow who had put Buck Waxman in mind of Red himself. There was actually very little resemblance. Red was lanky, loose-jointed, limber as rawhide. He had a wide mouth and a long nose, and dark freckles were baked in under the sunburn. For all of Red's youth, there was something about him that made people know he was a man, fit for a man's work; and that he was none the less

dangerous because he grinned, spoke softly, never got excited. His hair was the color of burned brick. He wore two guns and no gloves.

Red eyed this other boy critically and not unfavorably. A cowboy, too, but with somehow the taint of the East about him, and none of Red Clark's rawhide sinewy strength and quickness. A nice-looking boy, but his face hadn't been whipped by windstorms, scorched by the sun; and he didn't have the muscular gauntness of one who had ridden through stampedes or followed the trail of men who would kill him on sight. But Red was instinctively partial toward him, noticing that he played without nervousness and lost as if it didn't matter. And he was sure in bad company.

It happened that Red's feeling toward professional gamblers was just about the same as his feeling toward any other sort of sneak thieves. He had backed outlaws up against the wall and felt a certain respect for them. He had come down on rustlers with the smoke of burned hair still in their noses and sometimes felt that they were good men who had straggled off the trail. He had once even cut down a horse thief and stood fast, with both guns out, talking for the man's life, though there was no doubt about his guilt. But the sight of sleek, lily-fingered gamblers clawing in chips gave Red much the same sort of sensation that a right-minded dog feels at the sight of a cat.

These gamblers held their cards low down though well in sight, with both hands up close to their breasts, barely skinning the pips as if afraid somebody might spy over their shoulders and signal. Red was pretty sure of what they were doing, because he had seen men examining the bodies of gamblers who had died suddenly in the midst of a game, and he had heard old-timers talk. But these fellows were clever and careful.

The two cowmen, one called Jack Harris, the other Frank Sterns, were ill-natured losers. They slammed the cards about and cursed their luck, as, Red felt, they would no doubt have cussed their wives. Yet they seemed to have unlimited credit. One and then the

other would thrust out his paw toward Hamel and say, "Let me have another stack, will yer, George?"

The fat, dark, bulky George Hamel would count out a stack of chips, hand it over, then make little notations on a card that he took from his vest pocket.

"Hmm," Red said to himself, "Hamel's stakin' them pikers an' lettin' 'em lose their shirt tails. He must be a worse judge o' character than me, which most saloon keepers ain't, to hand 'em over money thataway. They ain't the sort as pays back what they borrow. Somethin' queer."

Red also thought there was something queer about a boy of near his own age having so much money as this young fellow had and was losing so carelessly.

"He looks honest, but I don't suspicion as how he's ever mixed much brow sweat with his flapjacks. One thing's sure, the which bein' that he ain't much educated to the way of a couple o' tinhorns with a sucker."

The young fellow bet heavily and lost frequently, but seemed pleased if he stole a pot, as he did now and then, on a pair of deuces or worse.

Then came the time when the younger gambler—he with the lean, pale face and the long, agile fingers—dealt. The young man sat under the gun and, his ante being raised by Hamel on the left, and seen by all players, he lifted it back with a couple of blues. Hamel trailed along. Harris raised. Sterns came in for the boost; then the second gambler, the middle-aged one with the sleek, well-fed face, gave a wallop of six blues. The dealer pitched away his hand. The young fellow then saw all rises and topped it off with ten blues.

"Whew," said Hamel, "that lets me out."

"I never seen such luck!" Harris grumbled, and slammed his cards to the table, throwing them away.

"I'm out!" Sterns growled.

The big gambler squinted at his hand and murmured, "Nothing much to stay on myself, but if I catch——"

"Cards?" said Wolf Face, the dealer.

The young man shook his head, laid down his hand and covered it with a chip.

"Hell," said Hamel, trying to be pleasant. "Pat hand! Well, she's shore better to be born lucky than handsome—like me."

Bystanders laughed a little.

The big gambler gazed intently at the young fellow as if trying to read his face, then slowly threw away one card and lifted a finger. He took up the card that fell to him, slipped it into his hand, cautiously peeked at the pip, and nodded: "Do your talkin'."

The young man poked in twenty blues and picked up his cigarette. His fingers were not trembling, and his blue-eyed glance toward the gambler was calm. And Red Clark, a watchful boy, said to himself, "Good Leather!"

The gambler eyed the young fellow with studied deliberation, hesitated, then leaned forward, estimating the table stakes.

"I'll call," said the gambler. Adding, "An' tap you!"

Men about the table whistled in interested surprise, and bystanders peered at one another with vague head shakes.

The count of the young fellow's chips came to something over twelve hundred. He pushed them in, then spread his cards—a full house, three kings and a pair of sixes.

"Ow," said Hamel, "he did have 'em!"

Bystanders clucked commendingly. Folks sort of liked the young fellow's easy manner and steady fingers. Time and again he had bluffed the gamblers out of medium-sized pots, and now in a big hand he had the cards. That was nice.

The boy put out his hand and began to scrape in the pot.

"Just a minute," said the gambler with sinister softness. "I got something I'd like you to see."

One by one the gambler began to toss his cards to the table. Four deuces fell with noiseless flutter.

"Had 'em all the time," said the gambler, smiling coldly.

The young man gazed at them, then leaned back and said quietly:

"All right, I'm through. Five thousand. But that's poker!"

"He's shore a good sport!" Hamel announced loudly, with unctuous approval.

"Dead game!" said the big gambler. "I like thoroughbreds—yeah!" With unhurried movement of soft white hand he began to pick up the chips.

Then there was a hasty stir among the bystanders, gasps and blurted oaths. The gambler looked up sharply with a flicker of fright on his face. He was staring into two guns, and behind them the face was sun-blackened, bony, muscled at the jaws, wore a twisted smile, and the blue eyes were as steady as nailheads and bright as if the nailheads had been polished.

"Gosh a'mighty!" said Red from over the tops of his guns. "Don't you understand sign language! Get your hands up!"

The gambler flipped up his palms, but scarcely raised his elbows off the table.

In the midst of the startled hum and broken babble, Hamel half arose from his chair with face angrily darkened, and shouted, "Here! What'd you mean——"

"Feller, keep the bottom o' yore pants on that chair!" Red told him.

"B-but——" Hamel shouted with stuttering explosiveness.

"Or the carpenter'll be makin' you a suit o' clothes for to wear in hell!" Red added cheerfully.

Hamel settled back in staring amazement, as if not quite understanding—as if wondering, too, if this lanky Red, a stranger to Tajola, wholly understood just what he was doing.

Apparently he did, for Red added, "An' you other hombres, if any o' you love this tinhorn well enough to cut in on my play, you're welcome!"

The young fellow, who also had red hair, twisted about with startled interest, gazing up over his shoulder.

"My gosh! Brothers!" said someone, noticing that the two redheads were about of an age.

"Who the hell are you!" Hamel shouted.

Red started to answer, but the young gambler who had dealt was sitting to the right of the young fellow who had just lost his pile; and, with shrinking twist of body, he crouched low and to one side with his hands out of sight under the breast of his coat. And Red, without any warning at all, suddenly leaned forward and with downward swing of the long barrel in his right hand cracked Wolf Face's head.

"A feller as can't sneak the draw no better'n that ought'n' try," said Red critically.

As the unconscious man slumped out of his chair, the men standing there saw a short nickel-plated gun lying beside him. A bystander picked it up and held it by the muzzle, and the better to appear neutral.

"Jack! You an' Frank!" Hamel shouted toward the cowmen sitting in the game. "You goin' let this——"

"Is your socks clean?" Red asked, eyeing Hamel. "'Cause if you don't keep that foodtrap locked, I'll plug 'er up with your own big toe!" Bystanders snickered. Hamel, a big man in the town, who bossed folks about and thought well of himself, had a look of painful amazement. "Some silence outa you, an' a lot of it, 'll be most pleasin'!" Red added.

There was an unhurried, unangered, slightly good-natured way about Red that did not make Hamel or the gambler feel more comfortable. They knew that he wasn't drunk and he wasn't scared.

The two cowmen, Jack Harris and Frank Sterns, gazed at him with squint-eyed suspicion. They seemed right on edge to interfere, yet hesitated because they, and the other folk who stood about the table, sensed that Red was calling a showdown on the gambler; and if he could make it good, all right. Harris and Sterns had lost enough to feel some pleasure in seeing the gambler in a tight hole.

The gambler sat pale and steady, with eyes unwinking as a snake's. His arms were crooked at the elbows with

palms out and lifted, but his elbows almost touched the table. He asked in a husky, anxious sort of tone, "Gentlemen! Gentlemen, you goin' to stand for this!"

Some of the bystanders cleared their throats, but no one spoke. Only those directly behind the menaced gambler had moved, shifting with hasty clack of high-heeled boots to right and left.

"Gambler, what's yore name?" Red asked in the unhurried voice of a man who had been through this sort of thing time and again and knew there was no need for haste.

"I'm Perley Price an' a square gambler!"

"I'm shore glad for to hear that," said Red commendingly. "Now how about histin' yore hands up—away up, plum straight up high as you c'n get 'em?"

The gambler's lips tightened and a moment's stare of hopelessness crossed his eyes, but he said nothing. Hamel's fat face grew nervously red, then paled to the look of a boiled beet, overcooked.

"Speak up, Perley Price," said Red encouragingly. "Folks is listenin'."

Price moved his lips nervously. The shadow of fear lay on his tense white face. They were big guns that he looked into, and the hands that held them were sinewy and steady. The face that looked down over them had the twisted smile and blue snap of eye that signified a man who was dangerous even if amused.

Price seemed to heave at his arms, but did not lift them. "I—I've got rheumatism an' can't—can't!"

"Yeah?"

"An' onct I was shot in the shoulder, left shoulder! It's stiff!" said Perley Price hastily.

Red laughed at him. "Poke them arms up, feller—or pay back all yore winnin's!"

Silence followed. Men peered inquiringly at Red, glanced with hasty questioning from one to another, eyed the gambler with riled suspicions, vague but highly unfavorable. They were mystified, yet understood clearly enough that the gambler was somehow caught. Price even looked a little as if he were being choked. Twice he

started to lift his arms, but he never raised them far and at last settled his elbows on the table as if indeed some kind of pain made him wince.

Men watched staringly. Hamel's big heavy face grew almost chalky as he stuttered, wanting onlookers to cut in and make Red back out.

"F-fellers, stop this damn fool!" he demanded.

"Huh!" said a big bearded old-timer who looked more like a miner than a cowman, speaking clear and loud. "You're wearin' a gun, Hamel. Stop 'im yoreself. Be inter-restin' for to see you!"

Men waited breathlessly, eyeing the gambler who played his part like a man half frozen, with much cold nerve; but he was caught, and daringly hesitated, hoping somebody might help him out. But nobody stirred. Most men thought that Red, though a stranger in the town, had cut the gambler's trail before and so had something on him—Red so confidently seemed to know what he was about.

Then there was the spurred jingle of shuffling feet coming over the saloon floor at a dog trot, and a moment later a slow voice, in mournful reproach declared, "Well, I'll be gosh-ding-damned if he ain't started somethin' awready!"

Buck Waxman's tall, rangy body straightened up behind the encircled group and, peering over, he added in weary drone of voice, "Price, you'd better do what the kid here tells yuh, 'cause if you don't, you'll have a mighty skimpy funeral, with most mourners cheerful."

"Well," said Price slowly, with good self-control, though he showed plenty of strain, "if anybody thinks I don't play square, I'm ready to—to—to" —it gave him a lot of pain to say it, but he squeezed out the words—"to pay back!"

"Not much you don't!" said the young fellow, also red-headed, who had lost his money. "When I play poker, I pay!"

"You ain't been playin' poker, son," Red snapped. "You been——"

"I said I'd pay!" Price, the gambler, interrupted hastily and in high-pitched voice.

He began counting chips and money, putting them into stacks. He also took chips from the pile of his unconscious partner, and, pushing them toward Hamel who was banking the game, said, "Pay 'im!"

"Not me!" said the young fellow with a gesture of refusal. "When I lose, I lose!!"

"Coax 'im, Hamel!" Red suggested.

Bystanders, now pretty clearly understanding that Red somehow knew that the gambler had cheated, clucked, "Take it, kid!" "It's shore yourn, son!" "Be a bigger fool not to take it 'n you was to lose it!" "I wisht I'd a-had me a redheaded friend like him standin' behind me in some o' the poker games I been in!"

Hamel, seeing how sentiment ran, counted over the money and with a bad grace pushed it to the young man, saying, "She's yourn, since Price wants to give it back. That there shows she's been a square game, don't it!"

"Yeah," said Jack Harris, "the which bein' so, I'll just be next in line for to be persuaded she's been a square game!!"

"Me too!" said Frank Sterns, enthusiastic.

"But see here, boys!" Hamel protested severely. "You boys ain't goin' be pikers an' squeal? Besides——" Hamel frowned, leaving much unsaid.

" 'Besides' be damned!" said Harris, glaring defiantly at Hamel. "I don't know what it's all about, but"—he whipped up a gun and leveled it straight at Price—"me an' Frank here have dropped over a thousand dollars. An' if anybody's goin' be paid, we want in on it. What'd you say, gambler?"

"My game's on the square! Ask Hamel. He's knowed me a long time. But I'll pay!"

"If folks don't like losin', you pay 'em back. That's shore bein' on the square!" said the bearded old-timer.

The young poker player, seeing that other losers in the game were collecting, at last clearly enough understood that something had been wrong and that he was

as much entitled to have his money back as if the gambler had been a pick-pocket. He stacked a pile of twenties, picked them up and, twisting about in his chair, turned with hand lifted to offer Red a bit of a reward; but Red Clark had gone.

"Who was he?" the young man asked.

"Who, eh? Yes, who was that fool kid!"

"Who knows? I never seen 'im before."

"Waxman knowed 'im."

"Waxman? Hey, Waxman!"

"Hell, ol' Waxman's gone, too!"

"Cool hombre."

"Kid hell! His guns was man-sized!"

"Sneaked off!" said Hamel, rising up and looking about as if hopeful of finding Red near.

"I hope he don't run outa town!" said Mr. Perley Price who had stooped solicitously over the unconscious Wolf Face, whom Red had *whammed* over the head with the gun barrel. "Tryin' to make it appear my game ain't straight!"

"Feller," said the bearded old-timer who looked like a miner, "I wouldn't go git all overhet from hurryin' to find that young un. No, I wouldn't. You go git all in a sweat, you might catch cold sudden. Yeah!"

CHAPTER III

The Puncher With Three Names

RED was up in his rooms at the hotel. He sat in the only chair. His boots were off and his guns hung on the bedpost. With his back to the lamp he was trying without much interest to read an old newspaper, now and then eyeing the partition through which came the sizzle, pop, and splutter of a noisy sleeper.

"Yessir," Red mused, "if he ever gets married an' his wife shoots 'im, me, I'm goin' testify she done right. Sounds like he was sawin' through an empty rain barrel."

Footsteps came along the hall, stopped; then there was a tapping on the door.

"I ain't doin' it!" Red called. "It's comin' from the next room. But he won't wake up. I've tried."

"It's me! And can I see you?"

"Lots o' folks call 'emselves 'me.' Which one are you?" Red asked, rising.

"The boy who was playing poker and——"

"Oh, you, hunh?" said Red, opening the door.

"And I've come to warn you!" the young fellow exclaimed nervously.

"Now ain't that nice! Come in an' set. You think them tinhorns are goin' to lay for me, unh?"

Red, closing the door and pointing toward the chair, grinned at him.

"How do you know that?" asked the boy.

"Me, son, I know the breed. Personal, I never 'sociate with gamblers 'less they've got a rope round their neck. I play some poker, but allus there must be some calluses on the hands o' the fellows I play with."

"I was in a back room. Wanted to be alone and think. In the dark. I heard the gamblers talking. They said——"

Red nodded. "I reckon. They're goin' to lay f'r me, unh?"

"Why, yes, but how did you guess?"

"Shucks, son! Now an' then I stomp on folks' tails. Tinhorns is just snakes that learned to walk on two legs. Step on their tails an' they try to bite when you ain't lookin'. Though a good, honest ol' rattler, he don't give a damn whether you're lookin' 'r not. It's why I like rattlers better'n some folks. What's your name, son?"

"Oh, well, call me Smith and let it go at that."

"Nope. I won't. It's a good name, but supposin' in a crowd I was to sing out, 'Hey, Smithy!' Set down."

The young man sat down on the only chair. Red dropped onto the bed, drew out tobacco and papers and offered them.

"Thanks." As the young fellow rolled the cigarette he glanced up, sort of looking Red over in an admiring

way, and said, "I wish you'd tell me something. It puzzled me. Puzzled other people, too. They were all talking about it. You must have known that gambler was cheating and—"

"An' why didn't I plug 'im? Well, sir, 'tain't what some folks call etty-ket for a bystander to shoot card sharks. Them as is settin' in his game has what you call first rights. But I'll make you a confession, son"—Red was not much older than this boy he called 'son'—"I didn't know he was cheatin'!"

"You didn't!"

"Nope. I've knowed some honest gamblers, but mostly they was broke half the time. An' I've seen some dead gamblers as wasn't honest. I ain't onto all the tricks a gambler can play, no more'n I can outguess the devil. But Mr. Perley Price held his cards like he wore a contraption what is called a holdout. An' I'm cur'ous. It's a weakness with me, bein' cur'ous. So I sort o' experimented. If he'd raised his arms clear up, his cuffs would have dropped. Ever'body'd have seen whether or not he was wearin' one."

"But what if he had lifted his arms and there hadn't been a holdout?"

"I'd had to do a hell of a lot of apologizin'—maybe. I'm an awful poor hand to 'pologize. Makes me feel bad. I'd 'a' been in a pickle, shore. But I was just bettin' with myself that he wouldn't raise his arms. I'm sorta lucky when I don't show no sense. It's got to be a kind o' habit with me—bein' lucky!"

"But if he had raised his arms, sudden-like, and there'd been a holdout," the young fellow asked, "would you have shot 'im?"

Red grinned. "Hunh! I reckon not. If he'd showed a holdout, my guns 'ud've been as superfluous as an old sweetheart at a feller's weddin'. Them two wicked-eyed hombres, Harris an' Sterns, would've made him look like a lobsided doughnut. You see——"

Red stopped, listening. The rumble of snores in the next room had taken on a shriller pitch. Red knocked

on the partition. The snores stopped momentarily. "Some folks are dis'greeable even in their sleep."

"I feel I owe you something for what you did," said the young man, and put a hand down deep into his pocket.

Red shook his head. "How'd a kid your size an' age ever get hold o' that much money?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Yeah?" Red asked distrustfully.

"Yes. My mother died when I was a boy in school back East, four or five years ago, now. I didn't like it back there, so I came back to the ranch of the old man up in Colorado where she had been living—he had been a friend to my grandfather, or something. He was one of those old-timers who won't talk much. Anyhow, I was twenty-one not long ago, and this old man took me into town and at the bank said I had five thousand dollars coming. Said my mother had left it for me. It was mine. I didn't know what to do with it. Then this old-timer, he died and the ranch was sold. One day about a month ago I was into town and a fellow that works in the post office told me there was a letter for me. I went and got it. Here it is——"

He drew out an envelope and offered it to Red. Red leaned forward and eyed the envelope without touching it. The address was to Mr. Jerry Douglas, Turdoz, Colorado.

"You him?" Red asked.

"Yes. Read the letter. Then you'll understand why I am so puzzled."

"Umh," said Red and gingerly fingered the letter. It was written in pencil, laboriously, as if by one not used to writing. It said:

"Dear sir, Me I know all about you an how you are now twenty-one yers old. Maybe Im gettin myself in a hell of a lot of troble in tellin you to come down here to Tajola, but come anyhow, son. Whatever you do, don't let nobody know yore name is Jerome Douglas. I knowed yore mother well an I know all about yore dad,

the whitch you don't. When you come to Tajola you stick around town an sorta give out as how yore name is Frank Peters an me I'll look you up an sorta try to help you. I know all about everything an I'm doin it more for another feller than for you. He's alright but an orful fool, the same as most folks, an me too, maybe. You come, son. You'll find me a frend. Yores truly."

There was no signature.

"I came to town yesterday. But somehow I was a little afraid to use the name of Peters, like this letter says to, before I had looked around. Of course I didn't use my own name. I just called myself Smith. I don't know what to make of it. I feel queer and uneasy about it."

Red grunted, noncommittally, and began rereading the letter.

"I had all that money in a satchel," young Douglas went on. "I just sort of got to playing poker. There was nothing much else to do. Tonight I got deep into the game and couldn't quit and didn't somehow care. A while ago, when I overheard the gamblers talking, I felt I just had to find you and warn you, so I came over here to the hotel and asked if——"

Red had folded the letter and was putting it back into the envelope when he heard shuffling steps along the hall and a knock on his door.

"Yeah? What you want?" Red asked, standing up, eyeing the door, and unconsciously slipping the letter into the breast pocket of his shirt.

"Ol' Buck Waxman, he's bad hurt an' askin' for you, mister!" the voice called through the closed door. "Will you come?"

"You're damn tootin'!" said Red, and with a backhanded sweep of his right hand he whisked a gun from its holster at the foot of the bed, at the same time jerking open the door.

A small, old, bow-legged man in dirty blue overalls with bleary eyes stood there. He flung both hands away up rigidly, made a sound as if poked in the belly, and kept his mouth wide open.

"Act like you seen a ghost. Come in here an' set down!"

The frowzy old loafer stammered and shifted his feet, hesitating, wanting to go away, but not daring. "I jes come with word—like I was tol'," he said.

"Well, you just come along in here like you been told, too!"

Shorty came in. He stopped with sudden pop of eye at the Douglas boy and blinked. Two redheads of about an age in the same little room almost made the old loafer think he was seeing double.

"Set down," said Red, reaching for his boots.

Shorty sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. Red, standing on one foot, began to slip on a boot, and asked, "Who sent you, Shorty?"

"W-why a feller. Ol' Waxman, he's been——"

Red snorted impatiently. "Listen, feller. If an angel come an' told me, I'd know 'twasn't so. Listen. You hear that sound like a barrel full o' tin cans rollin' downhill? That's ol' Buck, snorin'. I've had to crawl out an' leave him all the blankets too many times not to know. Besides, he didn't ride off outa town like folks thought tonight there at the corral. He changed his mind an 'put his hoss in the stable behind the hotel, then come up an' talked with me awhile. After the which he went to bed. So just for your own information, so you won't have no doubts, me, I'm tellin' you you are a liar. An' a danged poor one. It's awful wrong, Shorty, for to tell lies. Who's layin' for me?"

Red had got into his boots and was buckling on his guns.

"W-why-er—I—I—d-don't know nothin' an'——" Shorty stopped, not liking the way Red was eyeing him. "I come like I was tol'!"

"Who told you?"

"A—er—f-feller."

"Name?"

"I n-never seen 'im be-before."

"An' most likely won't ever see 'im again," said Red reaching for a gun.

"Ow—it was Hamel!" Shorty blurted, shrinking with his eyes on the gun and about the same expression on his face as if he had awakened in bed and found his nose near a rattlesnake. "But he'll kill me if he knows I tol' yuh!"

"What you grumblin' about? You need killin', don't you? Come over here for to coax a nice boy like me into a trap! Who's layin' for me, an' where?"

"I don't know! Hones', mister! Hamel, he said for me to come an' tell yuh Waxman had been hurt an' was a layin' down to the Stage Company barn, an' askin' for yuh! So I come an'—I wouldn't've, come—if—I thought Hamel, he meant for to do you some dirt."

"Yeah, you're so kind-hearted it shows in yore face—like a boil on a skinny nose. So they want me to come waltzin' into the Stage Company barn, hunh? Son"—this to young Douglas—"I hate to be unsociable. But I'm goin' out to get me some fresh air."

"But you're not, surely, going down there!" said Douglas, rising. "Let me—I'll go with you and—— Why they mean to kill you!"

"Go off an' leave Shorty here all by his lonesome? No, we can't do that. You keep 'im company. An' if I don't come back, Buck Waxman'll wear his ears for a watch charm!"

"I'll wear 'em myself!" said young Douglas, frowning at Shorty, who twisted a foot about an ankle, hunched his shoulders, and peered up anxiously with watery booze-reddened eyes. "You damned dirty . . ." Douglas in nervous anger cursed him at length. "Just as much a murderer as if you shot 'im in the back yourself!" Shorty's slack mouth hung open like a flytrap.

Red listened critically and interrupted commendingly with, "I reckon bein' to school back East does sort o' help a feller cuss some. I've allus heard that edycation was a good thing for to have. An' you speak fluent. Shorty's eyes is just a-poppin' out with the joys o' learnin'. He feels like he'd bumped his nose agin a hornet's nest—don't you, Shorty? An' Shorty ain't no killer—are you, Shorty? You've kicked a crippled dog, now an'

then, maybe, ain't you? He's so peac'ble he don't even carry no gun. Or is it 'cause a gun'd sort o' get in yore way while emptyin' spittoons an' sweepin' out Hamel's saloon? An' right now Shorty here is most prayerful that I'll come back, sound an' whole. Or without no holes! Ain't you, Shorty? Yeah, o' 'course you are. The kid here needs some ears a-danglin' on his watch chain for to dress 'im up, an' you got handsome ears, Shorty! 'Bye!"

Red opened the door, stepped through, and pulled it to. The clank of his spurs rattled in the hall as he went at the stride of a man hurrying.

"W-who is he?" Shorty asked a little breathlessly and wiping his forehead with a dirty palm as he blinked at the closed door.

"I don't know who he is," said Douglas. "But he's the best friend I've got. And if he gets hurt, I'll kill you! You dirty . . ." Douglas again cursed him angrily, nervously, with feeling.

CHAPTER IV

The Barkeep Who Said Nothing

Red went down the stairs and turned into the hotel barroom. The barkeep was half asleep with a cigarette smoldering in his fingers. No one else was there.

The bartender straightened up in the chair where he was idling and said, "Ol' Crawley come a while ago lookin' f'r you?"

"Who's he?"

"He ain't much o' nobody. A kind of a sweeper-out down to the Stage Barn, an'——"

"A sawed-off runt what looks scairt o' water? Yeah, he found me. Brought me word from a feller. Tell me, who owns the Stage Company?"

"Huh? Say, who owns most near ever'thing in Tajola! Hamel does."

"I was jus' cur'ous. Left my horse down there 'safternoon when I rode in. Mind tellin' me the time? I had me a nice watch onct, but a slab-sided piece o' lightnin'

that was covered with hosshair up an' flung me kitin'. I hit the ground so hard that there watch wouldn't never keep time no more."

"She's twenty o' twelve," the bartender said, pulling out a watch as big as a biscuit. "I shut up at twelve when business is like now. Say"—the bartender's eyes glowed with new interest—"was it *you* as horned in on that poker game over to the Cross Bar tonight?"

"I was 'mong them present."

"You're most likely to be among the missin', too, if you don't take care!" said the bartender with a kind of confidential drop to his tone, looking Red over from hat to boots.

"You think maybe I ought to hit the leather an' kick up some dust?"

"I would," said the bartender with a kind of confessional frankness. "Folks, they have a way of dyin' o' lead poisonin'—mysterious—down in this here country. The barkeep nodded slowly. "Savvy?"

"No," said Red, "I don't savvy why growed men that ain't cripples put up with it."

The bartender, who wasn't a young man, looked at him carefully, glanced toward the door, then ran his eyes all about as if to make sure that no quiet listeners had slipped in. Then he went behind the bar and without a word put out two glasses and pushed the bottle toward Red. Red poured out a short drink. The bartender filled his own glass, grunted, "Here's how!" and tossed the liquor at his mouth. Then with elbows on the bar he leaned forward, eyed Red, and spoke.

"Listen, son," he said. "I ain't one o' them strong silent men who keeps their mouths shut 'cause they don't like for to talk. I do it 'cause I don't wanta get shot. I've worked in places where bullets hummed like hornets, an' me, I've squatted down on the floor, mighty neutral, an' held my breath. Yeah, like 'fore you're married you do when waitin' to see if the girl is goin' say she'll marry yuh. Or after you're married you do when waitin' to see if the old lady is goin' believe that there

blonde hair was put on your shoulder by a feller who was playin' a joke. You ever been married?"

"So far my bad luck, it ain't ever took that form."

"Women is queer folks. 'Specially after they get to be your wives." The bartender gazed reflectively at the ceiling, then sighed. "I come down to Tajola a short while ago an' took this here job because my home life, it wasn't happy. Have 'nother drink?"

Red took another short one. The bartender filled his.

"I ain't been here long, an' I'm quittin'. In a way o' speakin', you an' me is both strangers to these parts. Like I was sayin,' I don't much mind little commotionate shindigs now an' then, the which is plum customary in a barroom. I know some folks say it ain't mannerly in a barkeep for to dodge—sort o' intimates as how boys as is exercisin' their trigger fingers ain't trustworthy. I don't like for to insult no customers, but I got hesitations about bein' perlite enough to get buried. But—"

The talkative bartender again looked about carefully, then filled his glass once more.

"I been here three weeks," he said. "There ain't been no what you call shootin' scrape in all that time, but"—the bartender's voice dropped into a husky uneasy whisper—"but three men, they've been killed, mysterious. Shot down on the street in the dark, or killed out near the edge o' town! I hear tell that out on the range men has been dyin' mysterious thataway, off and on for a year!"

"Hmm," said Red, noncommittal but encouraging. Old Buck Waxman had hinted at something of the kind, but Old Buck was about as uninformative as a signpost that has blown down. Red listened well seemed interested but a little skeptical. It was quiet and lonely in the saloon, suitable for indiscreet gossip, and the bartender was just aching to talk freely.

He said, "You're a stranger an' leavin' town, ain't you?"

"I'm a stranger," Red agreed. "An' I ain't got no hankerin' for to what you call sojourn permanent in Tajola. An' I wouldn't want to put no strangers to the

trouble o' buryin' me. I'm thoughtful thataway. So figger right soon now to slip out the back way an' go down to the Stage barn. That's where my horse is."

"That's right," said the bartender, approving. "Strangers has a way o' gettin' killed here in Tajola. 'Specially if they is nosy an' meddlesome. One o' them fellers that got killed recent—it was a mistake. He was just a train robber, sort o' vacationin', but he went about watchful an' listenin' so folks misunderstood his motives. The other two, they'd been hired for to nose about. But they run up against a cold deck. Musta been as how somebody was onto 'em 'cause they'd just come to town, had some supper, took a couple o' drinks right here at this bar, an' went for a little walk. 'Bout ten minutes later there was some holes in their backs, an' the nex' mornin' they was took over across the arroyer an' poked away careful. Coyotes is bad hereabouts. An' one thing you've got to say for Tajola. Folks get a deep grave. Some writin' was found in their pockets, the which told us how they was detectives. Poor uns, I'd say. A detective that gets detected, he's as outa luck as a woman that shows her age."

"Hamel kill 'em?" Red asked bluntly.

The bartender gave a little start, glanced hastily about the barroom, then had another glass of whisky. "My good gosh," he said in a low voice, "you are some pointed in your remarks!"

"Shucks. I hear tell that Hamel, he owns the woodpile from the which coffins is made. Ever' business man, he likes for to do what he can to make trade lively."

The bartender shied off a little and eyed Red in unfriendly meditation.

"Me, I can't recklect as how I mentioned no names a-tall," he said and looked at his watch. "She's twelve o'clock. My hours o' pretendin' to labor is all done." He untied his apron and turned toward a peg, then glanced over his shoulder and shook his head. "You ain't goin' make no handsome corpse!" he said.

"You're right. I'm too skinny. The which makes me hard to hit an' easy missed. So I ain't goin' be a corpse

o' no kind. But you ain't got no call to shy at Hamel's name like you had seen a ghost. I hit town today innercent as a lamb that straggles into a butcher shop, sort o' friendly an' cur'ous. Then I horned in on the game o some blackleg tinhorns. They was Hamel's friends. He knows they're crooked as a cross-eyed dog's hin' leg. Awright. You bein' a good feller, an' fatherly, you tell me to up-tail an' skeedaddle! Now when I foller your advice an' run, who the hell am I runnin' from if I ain't runnin' from Hamel?"

The bartender gazed with a kind of blank-eyed confusion before Red's logic, and murmured: "I orta kept my mouth shut."

"No sir. You orta open her wide an' give me some o' yore hidden thoughts. I'm cur'ous. I won't squeak. Tell me why does a man like Hamel, who owns a cow outfit an' must have plenty o' money, throw in with tinhorns? An' what's wrong with this here country anyhow? Men gettin' killed. Rustlin' goin' on. Hell a-poppin' like eggs in hot ashes, an' ever'body sayin', 'Shh-hh-h! We mustn't talk about it!' Oh, it ain't just you I'm talkin' about. I got me a friend who's an ol'-timer an' so durn tough cactuses draw in their stickers an' curl up when he comes close. A rattler bit 'im onct an' the poor snake throwed a fit like D. T.'s an' rolled over, belly up, an' died. Well, sir, we talked some tonight up in my room an' he hinted an' hedged an' wrapped hisself up in silence like a peevish Injun when I asked questions. He ain't scairt o' nothin' on two legs 'r four—if they don't wear skirts. He likes me fine, an' 'ud trust me with his last half pint o' water in hell—'r whisky in camp. But he won't answer questions no more'n a deef mute that's died o' lockjaw. Here"—Red shoved the bottle at the bartender and pulled out a gold coin—"have one on me."

The bartender, pushed back the money, but filled his glass and, fingering it, spoke.

"Listen. Folks hereabout don't talk much 'cause they don't know what's what 'r who's who. Things is mysterious. I'm sort of a stranger too, down in these parts, but

ears is for to listen with. You say you're leavin' town, which is sensible. Do you by happenchance know about old Monroe o' the Zee Zee?"

"I've heard the name."

"Well him and Hamel are friends." The bartender stopped, nodded significantly, and appeared to feel that he had told everything.

"Yeah? Well. Go on."

"You don't appear to understand."

"You guessed it."

"Hmm," said the bartender. Then, with a meditative eye on Red, "I reckon you don't know much about ol' Jerry Monroe!"

"I've heard tell as how he's a bad one for to monkey with."

The numerous whiskies had warmed the bartender's tongue, somewhat loosened his discretion.

"Son, he is a devil in pants. Sour, silent, an' hard. He don't give a damn for nothin' 'r nobody, includin' hisself! Only Hamel. That's why Hamel does as he damn pleases. Ol' Jerry Monroe'll back 'im up, an' behind Monroe rides hellbenders right offen the headwaters o' Bitter Creek. Hamel hisself ain't nothin' but a barkeep who somehow made friends with Monroe twenty years ago. You asked why he throwed in with tinhorn gamblers, and me, I'll tell you!"

The bartender lowered his voice.

"Monroe's Zee Zee punchers makes the Cross Bar Saloon their hangout. An' they get trimmed at poker. Miners come in. Tinhorns rob 'em. Hamel'd cheat his mother out o' the fillin' of her last tooth! He's bad, plum bad. He 'pints the judge an' 'lects the sheriff. He's worked hisself up with Monroe's backin' till he's a purty big cowman hisself, but his instinks keeps him still a low-bred saloon keeper. An' folks is scairt o' him. Scairt o' Monroe!"

"Then these range killings? Who does 'em?" Red asked.

"Me, I'm a stranger, but I hear talk, an' I'm tellin' you. Ain't I tellin' you?"

"Plenty."

"Awright. Lissen. Folks don't know who's doin' 'em. Folks does say that ol' Jerry Monroe don't fight in the dark 'r shoot in the back. Besides, it's some o' his men as have been killed! Folks say Monroe suspicions Oliver Morgan of the Bar O Bar who holds the range north o' Rasalis Divide. You know about Oliver Morgan?"

"Heard the name."

"He's a big cowman. Not like Monroe. Married. Got a family. Purty wife. Nice girls. Monroe, he hates women worser'n a drunk hates pink el'phants. Can't stand 'em. That's what's the matter with 'im. His wife, she run off with a puncher, 'r he drove her off, 'r something. 'Fore that he was a human bein'. Since then he's been a terror. Ever'body hates 'im. Allus fightin' with his neighbors. Ain't got a friend livin'—'cept Hamel. That's why you'd better get to hell outa Tajola, son. Pronto! Savvy?"

"I'll go right down to where my hoss is!" said Red.

"An' 'member!" the bartender called. "I ain't said nothin'! Don't you repeat what I've told you. If you do, I'll call you a liar!"

"I'll be one if I ever peep!" said Red and pushed through the back door of the saloon.

CHAPTER V

Red Comes A-shooting

THE hotel sat alone on a corner, facing the street, which was unlighted except for the splotch of lamplight that fell through the open doorways of two or three saloons far up the street where a few men were still loitering at bars or gambling.

It was a moonless night, with stars flickering like distant windblown torches. Shadows were heavy, with a tinge of the desert's purplish blackness in them, and silence like a great presence holding its breath was over the town.

As Red stepped out of the rear door into the quiet night the tinkle of his spurs sounded loud. "Like I was

wearin' jinglebobs," he said to himself. He paused, unbuckled them, and rammed them down into his hip pockets. They were not comfortable. Pockets were not shaped to carry spurs. "Now I'm feelin' what a horse has to put up with all the time. I'd buck, too, if somebody was settin' on my back with them things in my ribs." Half unconsciously, from habit, he loosened the guns in their holsters, wanting to be certain that they would come slick and free when reached for.

The Stage Company had its barn, corral, and pasture out toward the edge of town. Tajola was a small town.

He was going the back way just to make sure that these clever hombres who had sent Shorty with the false message would not have a chance at him in case they had decided not to wait at the corral but to waylay him on the way.

Red talked silently to himself, meditating as he went along.

"Me, I was a smart baby to pick out for a dad a feller who was an old Injun fighter. 'Tain't no disgrace for to be careful, as the widow woman said when she had 'em put a big rock on her husband's grave. I wasn't in no great shakes of a hurry, 'cause I figgered on showin' up over here just about the time them fellers get to thinkin' maybe me an' Shorty ain't comin'. When surprise parties is planned it's allus well for to do your part. Makes 'em more entertainin'. Maybe I will light out tomorrer, but tonight—why, my own shadder 'ud be 'shamed to foller me if I backed off from this little celebration as has been arranged for me, special."

Red's hand half unconsciously fumbled at the breast pocket of his shirt where he kept tobacco and papers. He felt something unfamiliar.

"Gosh, I carried off that there Douglas kid's letter. Shorty comin' thataway sort o' made me forgetful. Maybe I hadn't better smoke yet awhile. Maybe there'll be plenty o' smoke right soon. That barkeep, he sort o' took the hobbles off his tongue, didn't he?"

Red, crouching low and cautiously using as well as he could the scant shadows of yucca, cactus, and what-

ever else cast its skeleton outline in the starlight, worked around back of the stake corral. Then, from a distance, he heard a shot. He hung motionless, poised and listening.

"Hmm. That there was up town. Just one shot. If my ears is doin' their duty, that wasn't no six-gun. Maybe somebody was invitin' ol' Buck to stop snorin'. Buck's funny thataway. He makes an awful racket when he sleeps, an' you can yell an' cuss an' kick an' beat a dishpan. He won't never hear you. But just you put a foot down cautious, snap a twig, or cock a gun, an' he's settin' up, waitin'."

Red came up to the high stake corral, but could not climb over without a lot of scrambling that would have put him up silhouetted against the light of the sky. "In the which case it might be a lobsided surprise party, with me on the fence like a one-legged chicken. When I point my hind end toward trouble I like for to be hossback. Not hangin' over no fence."

He crawled under the barbed wire of the pasture where there were the lumpy shadows of horses that dozed standing and lying down. Some of the horses stirred, rose, shook themselves, eyed him with questioning, forward flip of ears, and moved away slowly.

Red walked along the corral to where a row of crossbars served as a gate. He peered through into the corral, and saw two or three wagons, and a stage, with a wheel off. He crept through, drawing near the barn, pausing to listen. The dusty ground was littered with straw, making a noiseless cushion for his tiptoes.

The barn faced the street, with a wide high runway clear through. Men who were tall in the saddle could ride through on the lope without stooping. Red, keeping well in the shadows, edged nearer and nearer. He grinned as he heard the faint drone of a voice. The words were indistinct, but the tone was sharp with irritation. "Maybe he won't be so disappointed as he thinks he is!" said Red to himself.

There was, of course, always somebody on duty at the barn; but barn bosses were usually asleep at night—and

half asleep in the daytime, too. Usually they didn't have visitors after midnight.

When Red got to where he could peer into the wide, high driveway that ran through the barn from the street to the corral, he saw that two lanterns were hung on pegs. They were smoky yellow dusty lanterns that cut the shadows into queer heavy blocks.

"Thoughtful gazebos. Yeah. They thought I'd come a-rampin' in, all outa breath in a hurry, an' have them lights in my eyes."

A horse shifted its feet and rattled its halter in a stall. This horse was kept up so that the barn boss could drive in the horses from the pasture. Red edged along noiselessly, crouching and on tiptoes.

He made out the shadow of a man between him and the light. The man's back was to him, and he sat on a bucket hunched over.

" 'Tain't no use to wait longer. He ain't comin'."

"We'd better wait." The voice came from near the doorway. Then Red saw dimly a figure leaning against the doorway, keeping a watch up the street.

"I don't like it," said a third voice.

"My gosh!" Red thought. "This here reception committee is plum numerous! Though one of 'em may be the barn roustabout, who maybe thinks he ain't goin' take part."

"I don't think he's comin'," said the man on the bucket. "We been waitin' a hell of a long time."

"He ain't comin'," said the unseen third man who was squatting in the shadows. "An' me, I think you'd be sorta glad, Jack. He saved you some money in that poker game."

"Orders is orders, ain't they? Hamel's got us where the wool's short, ain't he? Besides, he swore up an' down them gamblers was square. I don't know. But I do know which side my bread's buttered on."

"Why don't he let Price an' Timkins do their own shootin'?"

"Why, he says this redhead is another o' them detectives. We gotta git rid of 'im. That's all."

"He ain't comin'," said the unseen man again, with a kind of stubborn intonation. "I bet he ain't. Maybe he's too smart."

"Well, somebody's comin'!" the man at the door announced. "An' runnin'. Git ready, Jack."

The man on the bucket jumped up, drew a gun, and sidled into the shadows. "You lay there still, Bob," he said. "Like you was hurt. He's expectin' to find Waxman bad hurt."

As the man on the bucket moved, Red had a look at his face in the lantern light—he was one of the cowmen who had been in the poker game.

For a time all was silence with no sound but the stir of the horse's halter rope as he tossed his head and shifted his feet. Then the man who was cautiously keeping watch at the door said, "Hell, 'tain't him a-tall! It's Tom Brown. Hey, you, Tom! What's the matter?"

"We got 'im, boys!" a voice called exultantly, and a man appeared in the doorway. A lanky man with a long, twisted nose and a twisted mouth, who had come hurrying with news and now strutted a bit as he came into the barn with the men gathering close about him.

"Yeah, we got 'im, shore! Y'see me an' Frank was watching cross the street to see him an' ol' Crawley come out an' head down thisaway. He didn't come. No, sir. He musta smelt a mouse 'r somethin'. Well, me an' Frank, we got tired o' waitin' an' knowed somethin' was wrong. So me, I started scoutin' 'round. Went round to the side o' the hotel where I saw a light. An' I looked up watchin' an' there, by God, through the winder I could see 'im, plain. I called Frank, an' we both looked. An' so help me, fellers, we could make out that he had ol' Crawley there in his room! So Frank he runs down to the saloon, gits Hamel's .38-40, an' hustles back. We waits and waits afore he moved up close to the winder, then Frank let him have 'er. Didn't you hear the shot?"

"Shore! Yuh mean he suspicioned o' Crawley? But hell, Tom, ol' Crawley hisself didn't know it was a put-up job!"

"I don't know nothin' about that. Frank an' me, we

ducked away over to the saloon, put back the rifle, an' had some drinks quiet-like. Then Hamel, he said for me to jog trot down here an' tell you boys to come along in. Another smart aleck is goin' to be carted over to the graveyard in the mornin'!"

"An' he don't go alone, you——" Red Clark came out of shadows as if thrown. The blackest oaths he knew rippled in curses, vivid as gun flame on his lips. Thinking to kill him, they had shot the other red-headed boy from the dark, in the back; and Red wasn't cautious when he was angered. He knew them for dirty killers, and he was an honest, hard-working boy with the blood of honest, hard-fighting frontiersmen forefathers pouring courage into his heart.

The startled men spun about, gasping, yelping in surprise, jerking at guns, swearing through wide-opened mouths as if at a ghost, for at the first flickering glimpse they recognized him. The lash of gunfire cut the shadows. The mingling roar of forty-fives echoed through the barn, shook the rafters, and smoke went up with puff on puff, dimming the yellow glow of the lanterns.

They had fired with hasty twitch of hands to thigh, and Red, with guns out in hip-low aim, laced their group with lead. They were bad men, the lot of them; but Red was the son of an old sheriff who had done much to teach desperadoes that honest men could be as reckless and more dangerous than outlaws themselves. There was a wild flurry of shooting, with men leaping for shelter and falling dead as if tripped hellward—with smoking guns outflung on the ground. Tom Brown crumpled with the dead center of his forehead splattered by a little black hole—going to the devil marked purposefully with Red's vengeance. Harris dropped trickily, belly down, and fired twice, then rolled over in spasmodic writhing, whipping legs and arms about and clawing the thick dust. Bob, the barn boss, frantically aimless, shot a time or two, then with zigzag leaps made for the door. He threw snap-shots backward as he glanced over his shoulder. Then he pitched headlong through the doorway, arms and legs outspread, face down in the

dust. The other man, known as Buster, jumped behind a post and with an arm out on each side shot rapidly but blindly, hoping for luck. And Red, taught from early boyhood to keep count of his shots, stopped shooting. He simply stood and waited in a low half crouch with one gun leveled, motionless as if frozen. And Buster, thinking one of his own bullets had struck, peered round the post and ducked too late. The guns fell from his hands and, grasping the post, hugging it, he slid down and lay still.

And Red stood still, breathing deeply, with empty guns down-tilted, and blinked through the smoky silence. Scarcely a half-minute had passed from the time he had jumped into the fight, and here he stood alone. His hat was gone, whether shot away or shaken off, he did not know. There was a warm trickle of something sticky down his pants leg but no pain, and the leg wasn't weak. Then Red blinked through the smoky haze and took a step backwards, drawing back. He peered as if seeing things that couldn't be, wiped at his eyes with a forearm and leaned forward.

There, looming in the dimness of the barn doorway, was a horse and rider, and the horse came at the slowest of walks with ears flickering in out-tilted inquiry. A big, long-legged black horse, and in the saddle a tall man. The horse with careful placing of feet stepped over the body of the dead barn boss and came on. The tall rider sat motionless with hands on the horn, and riding close, right into the lantern light, stopped, peering down.

His face was dark as old cowhide and bony, mask-like and marked with evilness, but there wasn't a weak spot on it; and the eyes had a frowning stare, straight as a knife blade and as sharp. Red had a queer sensation, as if face to face with something that wasn't quite human, as with a kind of groping vagueness he realized that this horseman must have been in the road out there, right in line with stray bullets, watching. And now he rode right into the lingering smoke of the fight, with hands on horn, quite as if he didn't care what had happened—or would happen. It wasn't natural, it almost wasn't human;

and Red, who had been in various sorts of mix-ups, and knew all kinds and types of men, had never seen anything like this.

The man gazed at Red a long time, saying nothing, then with a slight twist in the saddle, this way and that, looked down, counting the dead men. He looked at Red again, nodded slightly, said in a cold, slow, clear voice, "You've done well."

"Whew!" said Red, jabbing a gun into its holster and hastily wiping his sweaty forehead with the palm of his hand. "I thought maybe you was the devil! Give me an awful scare, comin' in slow an' solemn on that black hoss. Awmost 'fore the lead had stopped singin'."

The man's thin mouth twitched in a vague smile and he looked at Red with a steady gaze, and no man could have told what he thought, though the set of his face and the unwinking steadiness of his eyes made it plain that he was thinking. Then he asked in a calm, low, cold tone, like a man who had the right to know, even to judge, "How'd it happen?"

Red cleared his throat of the smoke's bitter sting, took a full step nearer, stopped, and with an uplifted face, said, "Here's facts, straight as a string. I rode in 'safternoon lookin' for a job, an' loafed over to the Cross Bar Saloon, where I spotted some tinhorns trimmin' a kid, so I spoke up over the back end o' my guns, coaxin'-like, an' they give 'im back his money."

"Was Hamel there?" the man asked with a jerk of words, cold and calm.

Red's tongue flickered in a pause. In this country, Hamel's seemed a dangerous name. "He was bankin', but purt' near done as he was told, the which bein' to set tight an' keep still," Red said. "I went along over to the hotel, but a rip-snortin' snorer was bunkin' in the nex' room an' made sounds like a bucksaw chewin' nails. Well, sir, along up comes that kid to say he'd overheard them gamblers ribbin' up for to plug me. Then along comes a little old unwashed runt for to say a friend o' mine had been hurt an' was layin' down here at the barn, askin' for me. I persuaded him for to tell me the

truth, so I left the kid to keep Shorty comp'ny, an' I come slow an' easy down here the back way, crept up close and set with my ears poked out. I don't know *jus'* what I'd a-done. Somethin' argumen'tive, I s'pose. But a long-legged feller come runnin' up, so joyful he was outa breath, for to say I'd been plugged with a .38-40 through the winder o' my room there at the hotel. The which means they murdered that kid, thinkin' he was me. So, I sorta set about all of a sudden for to what you call wreckti-fy their wrong notions. I wrecked 'em right, too! But you—you near scairt the pea-waddin' outa me, ridin' slow an' easy thataway—like bullets was bees an' you was sting-proof."

"What's yore name?"

"Me, I'm——" Red stopped, struck hard by a sudden thought. "Me, I'm mostly called Red. But I'll answer to the name o' Frank Peters!" He figured that the Douglas kid was dead, and the wherefore of his coming down into Tajola was veiled under the mysterious instructions of being told to use the name "Frank Peters." So Red thought he might as well monkey with the mystery and see what happened. He did it on impulse, recklessly, somehow vaguely feeling that he was sort of doing the Douglas kid a good turn in taking up the part he had been told to play.

"An' you're lookin' for work?" asked the grim, dark man, calm and cold, but somehow not unfriendly.

"Yessir."

"You're hired, Peters."

The name struck unfamiliarly on Red's ears. He blinked a little, then grinned, and asked, "If I don't seem too meddlesome, would you mind tellin' me what outfit 'tis I'm workin' for?"

"The Zee Zee."

"Ho-lee gosh! Then you're——"

"Monroe."

So this was the man Buck Waxman said had no friends, just a big pay roll. "A devil in pants!" the talkative bartender had called him. And Monroe sure looked it, all of it, but in a quiet, tense sort of way. A lot of

shooting and numerous dead men strewn about hadn't made him turn a hair.

Red didn't know just quite what to say, and so stood a little perplexed, half hazily feeling that he wasn't sure he wanted to work for Monroe.

Monroe swung from his horse. There was a quick, smooth litheness about him, and he stood tall and straight. His dark face had a frozen look. His eyes were bright and hard, with a look as if he were used to being a little suspicious of everybody, but not afraid of anybody or anything. Just watchful.

He dropped the reins and stepped aside.

"Unsaddle my horse," he said. "Water an' grain 'im. Give 'im a rub, an' turn him out in the pasture."

"You bet!" said Red. Men that Red worked for always liked the way he jumped to do whatever he was told.

Many a puncher, particularly one who had just gone through such a gunfight, might have had highfalutin' notions of his own importance and balked at rubbing down a horse.

In a jiffy Red uncinched the saddle, set it on a saddle rack, and spread the blankets. He picked brush and currycomb out of the box and led the horse to water. He got a measure of grain, put it into a feed box out in the corral, and while the horse ate, Red worked busily with currycomb and brush, half whistling, half humming.

Monroe stood by, watching, until Red led out the horse, then he stepped here and there, looking down at the dead men.

Monroe, riding into town, had been near the barn when he heard the shooting. He had spurred straight ahead and paused in the open road to see what was going on. Bullets whizzed near, but neither he nor his gun-trained horse flinched. It was part of what men called Monroe's "madness" that he never dodged or stepped aside when guns were going off. He seemed to believe he could not be killed, or not to care if he was.

And so he had come on into the barn before the smoke haze had cleared away. He was surprised to find that one man, and he little more than a lanky youngster, had

downed these gun-fighters. They were Hamel's men; but Hamel hired a bad lot. So did he himself. So did all the cattlemen of the Tajola ranges. They were always fighting it out among themselves over personal grudges. Life was cheap. Monroe's approval was pretty likely to go to the winner—if the fight had been fair.

As Monroe turned he saw an envelope on the ground and half idly stooped.

He glanced at the address, frowned, moved nearer a lantern, then stiffened with a startled jerk of body as if the thing had come to life and bit him.

Monroe glanced about to make sure he was not being watched, then he pulled the letter from the envelope and read. It was the letter that the red-headed boy had shown to Red and which Red had unconsciously taken away with him.

Monroe was cold and calm, the least furtive of men, but yet it was with a furtive look that he had glanced over his shoulder as he read, and the paper rustled faintly from the trembling of his hands. He stared blankly out toward the corral, listening to the faint scrape of currycomb and half-hummed words of a tuneless song.

Monroe, with movement of lips as if tasting the words, muttered, "Jerome Douglas—Jerome!" Then, "Red hair!" And this seemed to have a bitter flavor in his mouth. He added, "It can't be!" But he glanced down at the letter, nodding, mumbling, "Must be!" He set his jaws and scowled at nothing, then drew a wallet from his hip pocket and carefully put away the letter. He was troubled. For a time he looked toward the rear of the barn as if half minded to go out there and ask questions. He asked himself the question, "Who could have wrote it?" But he gave himself no answer. Then he swore under his breath, and it had the sound of a groan clipped by clenched teeth. With downward stroke of fist he muttered noiselessly, "Can't be! Still—maybe." He scowled at the dead men as if they themselves were witnesses that had to be believed, then again protestingly muttered, "Red hair!"

Monroe pushed up his hat, breathed hard, wiped sweat off his forehead. "Jerome!" His emotions were going through a sort of rough-and-tumble fight.

Then he heard vague, far-away sounds and cocked his head alertly.

There was stumble of running feet and breathless blurt of voices as men who had heard the echoes of the shooting came from up town to learn what had happened.

Monroe stooped quickly, picked up Red's hat, and with long strides went to the back of the barn. Red, with back to the passageway, was stooping low with swish of brush about the horse's hocks.

Monroe by flip of wrist sent the hat spinning at him. His voice had the snap of command. "Peters! Folks are comin'. Get out o' sight. I'll see you tomorrow. Up town. Hunt me up. Remember, you're hired!"

He faced about, going back into the barn.

Red whistled noiselessly and jumped aside into the shadows, hovering there to listen.

There was a stumble of men's feet at the barn entrance, a shrill chatter of questions, oaths, as the men who had come stopped short, gaping at Monroe.

"No, I didn't do it," Monroe said coldly. "I just heard shootin' and come ridin' up. When I come in 'twas all over. Maybe some o' you fellows know what it was over?"

He eyed them questioningly. They shook their heads, mystified. Some wonderingly exchanged half-furtive glances. One fellow ventured, "Maybe some o' Morgan's killers nailed 'em!" No one echoed that guess. No one felt that it was really a sincere guess, though Morgan and Monroe were enemies.

"Do you reckon," another man suggested, "they got into a quarrel an' kilt each other off?"

Another blurted, "Naw. These boys here was waitin' for to meet a feller an'——"

"An' maybe they met him!" said Monroe.

"No, sir. He didn't come!"

"Why not?" asked Monroe sharply. He had a sharp way of dealing with all men.

" 'Cause somethin' happened to 'im up town!"

"We'll all go back up town," said Monroe.

Red, having heard that much, listened no longer. He slipped quietly away, leaving the corral, again going through the pasture, and in a roundabout way made for the hotel.

CHAPTER VI

An Old Range Tragedy

UP AT the hotel he saw lamps burning and shadows moving about. The barroom was lighted. If the bartender had shut up shop after Red left, he had been routed out by men who always got thirsty when there was some excitement.

Red peered within. A half-dozen men, many of them in undershirts with tousled heads, stood about and had a solemn, uneasy air. Their voices reached him in the sound of a hesitant grumble, as if they were afraid to talk loud.

Red pushed through and stopped. The bartender's jaw dropped and so did the bottle he was just lifting to the bar. He wasn't entirely sober, and shook his head, blinking. "Gosh!" said the bartender; then, staringly, *"Gosh!"* again, sure that he was looking at a ghost.

Men had turned, eyeing Red.

"Ain't you dead!" one asked in a hushed tone.

"Why, we thought——" another began.

"Yeah, so'd some other folks!" said Red, flipping a thumb upward, vaguely indicating the room overhead. "But, like you, they thought wrong. Where's Buck Waxman?"

"He's up there with the doctor. Won't let nobody see you—'r what we thought was you!" said a pudgy man who puffed his cheeks as if blowing out the words.

"Have a drink!" the bartender offered.

"On me!" another urged.

"I'm buyin'!" said a third, slapping palm and coin to the bar.

"I'll be back, maybe," Red answered and went on through the barroom.

The pudgy man lifted his voice plaintively in, "What could've happened!" Then, accusingly, to the bartender, "Why, you tol' us that——"

"Now, lissen. He tol' me he was goin' light out o' town. When I heard what happened up there, I thought he'd gone back up for to git his duds 'r somethin' . . ."

Upstairs, old Buck Waxman turned in the open door at the sound of feet. His long mustache was as much adroop as if it had been wetted, and he fingered an end of it with twiddling twist of thumb and finger as he peered at Red.

Buck was dressed from hat to boots. His shoulders sagged, and one long arm hung loose as if he didn't know quite what to do with it. He eyed Red with a kind of mournful, staring look.

"Got 'im?" he asked.

"Got who?"

"Is this here a time to be smart-alecky an' act stupid?"

"I'm actin' natural, like allus."

"Didn't you go tearin' outa here a while ago after the feller that shot 'im through the winder?"

"I went tiptoein' outa here a while back down to the corral barn where some folks said you was bad hurt an' askin' f'r me."

"Listen, son," said Waxman in a droning reproachful tone. "That gun goin' off woke me up. An' I heard feet runnin' down the hall. I come in here an' took a look. When I seen it wasn't you, then I knowed 'twas yore feet I'd heard—hoppin' out for to catch 'em. So——"

"Must've been Shorty makin' his getaway. You see, Buck . . ." Red told the facts, fast.

Buck grunted. His face didn't change any more than a printed picture, but turned with mournful calm at Red.

"Onct I had me a little horseshoe affair called a mag-net," he said slowly. "You put it down near some iron filings an' they'd all come hoppin'. You're a gosh blamed mag-net when it comes to trouble. Shore as yore name is Red Clark, you——"

"Shh! Say, listen, Buck. Somethin' I didn't tell you. I told Monroe my name was Peters, Frank Peters. You see——"

The Adam's apple of Buck's throat bobbed up and down two or three times like a cork when a fish nibbles. He slumped forward a little, peering more closely at Red, then put out a hand on Red's arm, holding as if to make sure he wouldn't get away without answering: "You tol' him *what?*"

"Frank Peters."

Buck squirmed as if he had a sand burr at the back of his shirt, and in a plaintive, anxious tone asked, "How you come to do that?"

"I didn't downright say I was Peters. I jus' said I answered to the name o' Peters. I'm pertick-lar about lyin'—sometimes."

"Yeah." Buck's hand dropped from Red's shoulder. "Well, lissen. You be gosh-blamed pertick'lar now an' tell me how you came to call yourself Frank Peters."

Red pointed toward the doorway where the doctor and the wife of the hotel keeper were busy over a body that lay on the bed.

"On account o' him, Buck. When I heard that he'd been killed——"

"He ain't killed, quite. But go on—go on."

"Well, I sorta took his name for to see wha'd happen, because——"

"His name was Smith!" said Buck, emphatic.

" 'Tain't. It's Jerome Douglas. But he——"

Buck slowly pushed up his hat and scratched his head, hard. Then he reached for a big, red bandanna and blew his nose, making loud sounds. He turned and looked through the doorway where an old doctor with a whisky-stained nose crouched over the boy while the woman held a lamp in both hands for him.

"Let's git outa here," said Buck, interrupting. "Come on. We'll go down an' out the back way. Come on." Buck pulled jerkily at Red's arm.

"My gosh, Buck! If I didn't know you so blamed well, I'd say you act scairt o' somethin'!"

"You don't know me very blame well to think I ain't!" said Buck mournfully. Then with sharp interest, "Did he tell you about that letter he got?"

"He sort o' give it to me an' "—Red's hands were moving about his pockets, searching—"an' hell! I musta lost it. Stuck it in my pocket when Shorty banged on the door. Gosh, I had it when I started. But now—I sure lost it!"

Buck grumbled mournfully and with a pull at Red's arm started off down the hall. They were going as quietly as two thieves when Red, who had a sort of humming in his head from a vague thought that he couldn't quite get hold of, grasped Buck by the shoulder.

"Say!" Red exclaimed. "How'd you know there was any letter? He never told nobody but me!"

"I know a lot o' things I wisht I didn't," said Buck.

They went out to the shanty barn behind the hotel. Buck scratched a match and took up a lantern. Then, silently, he took up his saddle blankets and threw them across the back of his horse.

"What a-hell?" said Red. "You ridin'?"

"I reckon. Seein' as I ain't got wings, I gotta use hoss' legs. Me bein' in a hurry."

"Hurry about what?"

"To git so danged far away from you I c'n forget what you look like!"

"What've I done?" Red eyed him thoughtfully, like a man carefully doing a little sum in addition, such as putting two and two together.

Buck with shambling weave of loose-jointed body reached down the bridle and went to the horse's head, saying nothing.

" 'Twas you wrote that letter to 'im, hunh?' said Red.

Buck grunted submissively, then said, with long-drawn shake of head, "I ain't never goin' try for to do anything right agin! Here me, I been comin' into town a couple o' times a week, lookin' for young Frank Peters to show up, an' he goes an' calls hisself Smith!"

"Who is he? What you runnin' for? Good gosh, Buck! 'Tain't like you for to be nerv'us thisaway. Tell me

about it. Me, playin' I'm him, ain't I got a right to know?"

"You'll learn plenty pronto, son. Go an' find that letter thataway! Somebody's shore to find it. It'll be talked about. Monroe, he'll learn about it, then——" Buck broke off into a bubble of oaths accompanied by woeful shaking of head.

"My gosh, you act like you had cramps in yore belly, Buck."

"I feel thataway. Lissen. You know the reason me, I'm near fifty year old? It's cause I got discretion. I got a bad case of it right now. If it was catchin', like measles, you'd hit yore hoss an' help me kick up some dust."

"Well, tell me some things. What's it all about?"

"Awright. You've up an' passed yoreself off as Peters, ain't you? Well, jus' as soon as ever Monroe gits his eyes on that letter, he's goin' inquire around as to who was friendly with this Peters! Who knowed 'im? Who acted like he was layin' for to meet 'im? An' folks thinkin' you are Peters, they will up an' say, 'Why, ol' Buck Waxman!' Then Monroe, he's goin' look about for to git me in a corner some'eres an' say, 'Buck, what call you got to meddle in my affairs?' When Monroe gits folks in a corner, usual, they've got only one way o' gittin' out. That's to dig out after they git buried."

"Aw shucks! You can't make me believe you're scairt o' any damn man, Buck."

"I'm in a bad hole, son. Bad. Y'see, I sorta like Monroe. He's a devil. If him an' Old Nick got into a row, Old Nick, he'd go limpin' off with a sore tail, a-huntin' beefsteak for to put on his eye. But I've knowed 'im a long time—me an' my brother both. He's never talked intimate to me. But he has to my brother Bill. An' Bill, he's talked to me. That's where I got the notion for to bring that kid down here an' sort o' let Monroe get to likin' him without knowin' he was likin' his own son!"

"What!" said Red, making much the same sort of movement as if he'd sat on a tack.

"Yeah. Y'see, twenty year ago or jus' about, Monroe he got some damn fool notions. I, personal, suspect Hamel

give 'em to him. Y'see, his hair is black as the inside of a tunnel. Miz Monroe, her hair it was brown. She was a mighty fine woman. Purty as a picture an' proud as Punch. Monroe he was orful jealous. One day he come back out from town lookin' black an' a little drunk. Her an' him had a talk together in the house. Sorta loud, his voice was. I was settin' out behind the kitchen washin' some old chaps with saddle soap. She come out tall an' straight an' sorta pale, holdin' the kid up close. An' she says to me, 'Buck, take me to town.' So me, I ties a pair o' broncs to the buckboard, and off we go—her without a stitch o' clothes but what she had on her back. We go along in silence for a couple o' miles, then she says, 'Buck, could you let me have some money?'

" 'Me, I got less'n four bits,' I says. ' 'Bout how much was you wantin', Miz Monroe?' She says, ' 'Bout fifty dollars'll do. I'm going back up to Colorado.' I says, 'I'll git it there in town.' Then she set there sorta starin' at that kid's red hair. Jes' starin' an' starin'. After awhile she says, 'Buck, do you know Diamond Jack O'Brien?' He's a flashy red-headed gambler there in town that uses bottle-stink. I says, 'Yeah, I've smelt 'im.'

"In town there I takes her over to the boardin' house—we didn't have no hotel then—to wait stage time. Then I goes to the Express Office an' I says to the manager, 'I want for to borrer fifty dollars.' He says, 'No,' but takes a couple more looks at me an' kinda weakens, gets perlite and asks, 'What's the matter?' I explain that a friend o' mine is leavin' town an' needs the money, an' that if I ain't hung for usin' unmannerly means o' borrorin' it, I'll shore pay it back. So he gives it to me. Then I goes up to the Red Star joint, walks in, an' I asks sort o' casual-like, 'Where is Diamon' Jack?' Folks look at me funny-like. Then I hear as how Monroe had shot 'im. Most folks seem to think Monroe he done right. Me, too, for a time.

"Then one day me an' Oliver Morgan has a talk. Them days Morgan an' Monroe wasn't unfriendly. An' he says to me, 'Buck, now that Diamond Jack is dead, Hamel, he is sorta the whole show, ain't he?' I admits it.

Then he says, 'I allus sorta had me a suspicion that Hamel was scairt o' Diamond Jack. Leastwise, we all know that Jack wasn't scairt o' Hamel. Fellers used to josh Diamond Jack about bein' the only red-haired man in the county, an' he used to play up to 'em by winkin' an' lookin' wise. He was bad stuck on himself. Yeah. An', Buck, I guess if the truth was known, Hamel, he didn't care nothin' about the damage he done to a good woman like Miz Monroe if he could just make somebody mad enough to kill Jack—get 'im outa the way.

"What ol' Oliver Morgan said made me mighty thoughtful."

Red nodded in complete understanding, yet inquired with puzzlement, "How come a man like Monroe is thick with a gazebo like Hamel?"

Buck sighed mournfully. "Monroe, he's bull-headed. An' some ways—most ways—an orful fool. If he trusts a man, why then he seems for to feel it's some o' what you call aspershuns on hisself if you try to show 'im the man ain't fit to be trusted. He ain't got no great personal likin' for Hamel. He ain't got no great personal likin' for nobody, 'cept maybe my brother Bill. But Hamel for twenty year, he's sung the tune, 'Mr Monroe, folks is down on me 'cause I'm yore friend.' So Monroe, he says, 'I'll show folks they'd better let my friends alone.' An' he's helped Hamel get to be a rich man, rich cowman. He's lent 'im money. He's fought fights for 'im out on the range an' here in town. Hamel, he got all swelled up, an' he wouldn't know how to be hones' if he tried.

"Lissen. Onct I knowed a man that had a pet coyote. He'd raised 'im from a teeny-weenie pup. He give 'im all he could eat an' made him a pet. Well, sir, that there coyote, bein' a coyote, he'd sneak out an' kill the feller's chickens. He got so he'd even go out an' bring in other coyotes; an' onct when the feller was away they got into the corral an' killed some calves. That feller, he wouldn't never believe it was his coyote which'd come around an' lick his hand like a dog. So me, havin' a superspicious instink about all coyotes, I laid for 'im. Sorta proved things to the feller, the which is that yuh can't make a

coyote so fat he'll quit bein' a coyote. I got sim-lar sentiments about Hamel. Yuh can't make him so rich an' fat he'll quit bein' a dirty sneak. Personally, I think he hates Monroe 'cause he's afraid o' him an' 'cause he knows everybody in this part o' the country feels Monroe is the big man. Hamel, he wants to be the big man hisself.

"I'll tell yuh some more quick, then I got to ride. An' if you want to be sensible, you'll keep leg to leg with me! Monroe's losin' cows. Rustlers. Sometimes his men git killed, mysterious. Times is bad. Hamel an' other folks try to make out that old Oliver Morgan is doin' it. Awright. My brother Bill, he sorta coaxed Monroe into hirin' a couple o' what is called detectives from the cowmen's association for to come here an' nose about. They come an' a couple hours later they was dead. Who done it? I been gosh almighty cur'ous. You come with me, now, out on the range an' we'll sorta monkey around, seein' what we c'n learn."

"But what about that boy back in the hotel?" asked Red. "He's Monroe's son, ain't he? He's near dead, ain't he? You got 'im down here in this pickle, Buck, an' now when he's been bad hurt, are you goin' off an' leave 'im without no friends?"

"If he don't kick the bucket, he'll be took care of. Y'see, Monroe, he never spoke of his wife from the day she left. He's the sort o' feller that, if he gets an idear, won't let go. He'd most-near rather be in the wrong than weak enough for to change his mind—admit that maybe he made a mistake. But he did talk some in recent years to my brother Bill about the boy. Monroe, he believes in blood an' breed. It shows in his cows, in his horses, an' in his men. He used to sorta say to Bill that he'd like to git hold of the boy an' put 'im over the jumps for to see if the kid had the right stuff in him. He was allus wonderin' if this kid had the fightin' heart that a Monroe oughta have. Without sayin' nothin' to nobody, I jus' thought I'd git the kid down here an' sorta edge 'im into a job on the Zee Zee. The kid didn't know who his dad was 'cause when Miz Monroe sent me back that fifty dollars she said from now on her name was Miz Douglas,

like before she was married, an' that little Jerry was to be brought up to think that his dad was dead. There was, she said, some property as was comin' to her the which would be given the kid when he was twenty-one, and she was goin' to have him edycated like a gentleman. An' she asked would I allus sorta remember her an', if I had a chanct, kinda keep an eye on the boy. Yeah. I played hell, an' you helped me! You ridin' with me?"

"No, I ain't! That boy, he took a slug in his back that was meant for me, an'——"

"Awright, awright," Buck said hastily. "Have it yore way. I got me an instink that tells me when I orta run. You're goin' catch billy-hell, but I reckon ol' Monroe, he won't shoot you on sight like he'd come near doin' to me when he learns what I done. You can tell 'im the truth. The boy up there is his son. 'Bye. I'm on my way, but maybe I ain't goin' run so far as some folks think. An ol' man like me, he don't stand travelin' like younger folks."

Buck brought out his horse, thrust a loose arm toward Red, shaking hands, then with a quick nimble swing got into the saddle and was loping off through the starlit shadows before Red could ask any more questions; and Red's tongue fairly squirmed with questions that he would have liked to ask.

He watched Buck vanish with clatter of hoofs into the dim night, then shook his head. "He ain't runnin'. Not 'cause he's bad scairt. He's just goin' some place. An' me now, maybe if I had some sense, I'd be goin' some place, too."

CHAPTER VII

A Night's Rest for Red

Red felt that he wanted to talk to nobody up there in the hotel barroom. He didn't want to talk to anybody anywhere. He wanted to think. He had a strong impulse to run back up the stairs and ask the gray doctor with the red nose if Jerome Douglas was going to live. But

merely asking the question wouldn't help the boy. Yet asking such questions when a man was hurt or sick was the only way of showing that you were his friend.

Red thought about the most sensible thing he could do, when it came daylight, was to go back down over his tracks to the corral and see if he could not pick up that letter where it had dropped out of his pocket. If he could get his hands on that letter, then everything would be pretty well straightened out again. At least nobody would ever know that old Buck Waxman had been meddling with Monroe's affairs.

Red saw a light in the hotel kitchen and the shadow of a woman moving about. Mrs. Wyman, the wife of the man who owned the hotel, was busy poking up a fire.

She was a lanky woman who frowned a good deal and worked hard. Her voice was harsh and her hands were hard; she didn't like loafers, and thought that her husband was too much like one, but she was a good woman.

Red knocked at the screen door and she looked up, staringly. Mrs. Wyman wasn't one of the skittish kind of women. She didn't jump if she saw a mouse, or if strange men knocked on the door at about three o'clock in the morning.

She was standing in the light and couldn't see well, so she came toward the door, peering hard.

"Ho, you." Then all with a rushing outpour of words, "I can't really blame ye f'r gettin' shot at thataway, but I wish to the Lord it 'd been some'eres else than in my hotel! An' whar's ol' Buck Waxman? Monroe, he jes' sent up word f'r Buck to come an' see 'im over to the pesky Cross Bar, an' I reckon he'd better git thar. Whar is he—know?"

"Buck, he had some business as took 'im outa town, Miz Wyman." Red began to feel that maybe ol' Buck's "instink" was a pretty reliable guide. "An' me, Miss Wyman, I jus' wanted to ask how is the boy?"

"How is he? How is he!" She stood tall and scornful. "How'd anybody be with a hole in 'im *that* big!" She held up a bony fist. "The doctor, he took out a chunk o' lead that there big—'r nearly! You an' him brothers?"

"No'm. But we're friends. An' is there anything I c'n do?"

Mrs. Wyman made a snorting sound and dipped her finger into the water that was heating on the stove. "Men can't do nothin' around sick folks. Most helpless critters on earth, men is."

"Anything I *can* do, Miz Wyman. I'll see as how you get paid f'r——"

"Shet up. I'm tendin' to the boy the very best I can. Times is hard but I ain't got the place yit where I have to have pay f'r nursin' folks as is bad hurt! An' such a nice boy he looks. Much handsomer feller than you"—her staring glance seemed to be making comparison between Red's features and those of the wounded boy—"the which is why I thought maybe you wasn't brothers."

Red grinned. "Yes'm. Yo're right. I ain't never won no prizes on my good looks. But now in a flapjack-eating contest!"

"I don't know what this here country is comin' to!" She dipped her finger again into the water which was heating slowly. "Somebody jes' told me awhile ago there 'd been an orful killin' down to the Stage barn."

"Yeah?" Red inquired, interested.

"Ol' Monroe, he was standin' there when folks heard the shots an' come. But he pertended he didn't do it. Yit he's about the only man in this country that c'd shoot three 'r four fellers an' not git hit hisself. I tol' yuh he'd sent f'r Buck Waxman, didn't I? They was Hamel's friends down there to the barn, so o' *course* Monroe, he didn't do it. No. Hum!"

Plainly she did not like Monroe or Hamel, either.

She poked more wood into the fire and without looking up said, "You'd better get outa town. Them gamblers'll kill you."

"You think so, Miz Wyman?"

"Well, who do you think shot that boy through my winder? They mistook 'im f'r you, didn't they?"

" 'Pears like somebody maybe did make a little mistake."

"You talk like you was glad 't was him instead o' you that got shot!"

Red shifted his feet and wet his lips, but couldn't think of anything to reply. That was the way with women. They said things in such a way that you couldn't answer back without laying yourself wide open to more reproaches.

"I reckon I'd better be goin'," said Red.

"Whar ye goin'?"

"Don't know, perzackly."

Mrs. Wyman dipped her finger into the water. "Near good an' hot," she said. "The doctor, he wants it. Now you"—she went with long, quick strides across the kitchen and flung open a door—"bed down in here. It's where the cook sleeps—when we have a cook. I won't tell nobody I seen yuh. Let folks think you've rode off, the which ye ort've done. What ye stayin' for, anyhow?"

"Who, me? Well, Maw, I'll tell you. I'm sorta cur'ous to see what's goin' happen next. It's kind of a weakness with me, like whisky with some folks."

Mrs. Wyman looked at him with rather friendly stare. She nodded as if deciding, then spoke. "Why don't you ride over to Oliver Morgan an' git you a job? They're nice folks, the Morgans. Not like some people! In havin' trouble thataway with Hamel, maybe you'll git ol' Monroe down on you. An' he's a holy terror, Mr. Monroe!" She dropped her voice, hurriedly. "I'm goin' send word to Mrs. Morgan an' ask her for to take that pore hurt boy over to her place. They are mighty nice folks, the Morgans. Not like some!"

"Listen, Mother. Don't nobody ever stand up to Monroe?"

"No, they don't. Seems like he ain't human. Everbody's 'fraid of him. An' he ain't afraid o' nothin'. He's a mean man, Monroe is. Mean! 'Pears like nobody can't kill him. 'Pears like bullets jest won't touch 'im! The only good thing about 'im is them Waxman boys, Bill an' Buck. He'll halfway listen to them. Mrs. Morgan, she tells me if it hadn't been for the Waxmans that there'd been open war on the range long ago 'tween Monroe an'

the Morgans. You git to bed. The doctor's waitin' for this water. G'night."

She shut the door upon Red, leaving him in the dark. He struck a match, glanced about, but did not light the lamp. He kicked off his clothes, down to the underwear, and got into the bunk. He felt that he was not going to be able to sleep because there was so much to think about, but it seemed that he had just closed his eyes when there was a pounding on the door.

"Yeah?" he called. It was broad daylight; more than daylight. The sun was high.

Mrs. Wyman opened the door and peered through. She looked a little tired and excited. She had not been to bed, for as soon as young Douglas had been tended to and left, only half conscious, to rest, it had been time to start breakfast.

"Hurry an' git into yer clothes. I got a stack o' flapjacks an' 'lasses. Eat, then light outa town. Monroe hisself is there in the bar askin' f'r you, an' waitin'. An' you don't wanta meet him! Come, hurry an' eat. I had a fella go down an' git yore hoss. It'll be up here out back by the time you've et!"

Red grinned and thanked her with, "Now ain't that fine!" He liked for folks to like him—particularly for the gaunt, hard-working, hard-faced Western women to like him. It made him feel that he must be a pretty good sort of fellow, because such women were wary judges of human nature.

Red dressed, went out back and washed with much splashing and rubbing, sat at a kitchen table, and gobbled flapjacks and drank coffee. Mrs. Wyman looked on approvingly. The way Red ate made her know that he thought her flapjacks were good; and it made her know too that he wasn't a scairty-cat sort of a fellow who lost his appetite just because a man like Monroe was looking for him.

"You light out over to the Morgans!" she urged.

Red popped spoonful after spoonful of sugar into a fresh cup of coffee, stirred it thoughtfully, and shook his head.

"No, Mother. Monroe don't mean for to do nothin' to me."

"Don't you go trustin' him!"

Red reached into his pocket for money. "How much?"

"You havin' to sleep in the cook's bunk an' eatin' in the kitchen, I ortn't charge. But you can give me four bits if you want."

"The bed was soft an' the flapjacks sweet, like I like 'em." Red clicked down two dollars. "Me, havin' some attention special, I'm happy for to pay."

Mrs. Wyman reluctantly fingered the money, then put it on a high shelf. "I'll git some port wine f'r him." Her hand flipped up, vaguely. "Doctor said it might do 'im good."

Red fumbled again in his pocket. There was the faint clink of metal as he felt about, selecting what he wanted. Then with quick upward reach he put something on the shelf and went through the kitchen door.

Mrs. Wyman watched him, then turned and hastily searched with feeling reach on the shelf. She thought there were three dollars, but one seemed heavy and slick. She gathered them into her palm and looked. One was a twenty-dollar gold piece.

CHAPTER VIII

Red Versus Hellbender

MONROE STOOD at the end of the bar with a glass of whisky before him and said nothing. He was tall and straight, with quick eyes that went squarely to men's faces and searched them. Some men turned their backs to him and tried to pretend that they did not know he was there. His presence made conversation awkward. Monroe was not quarrelsome, but there was a feeling of menace about him. For the most part men moved quietly and spoke in low tones whenever Monroe stood watching. It was generally thought that he was a little crazy—but not noisy about it like most other fellows that had a touch of loco.

Red came in with shambling scrape of spurs, paused at the doorway, and looked about. He walked straight up to Monroe, who eyed him piercingly from under a scrutinizing frown, appraising him intently.

"Word's come you wanted for to see me, Mr. Monroe."

Monroe said nothing. He thought that he was looking at his own son, or at one that he wanted to believe was his son. Men who stood about, with stir of feet and half-furtive peering, watched. Monroe's jaws were locked. His dark eyes went up and down Red's body and fastened in a long stare at his face. He could not believe this boy was his son. He did not look like a Monroe or a Douglas; yet men, gunmen, were being poked away over on the sandhill—and that was something like what happened when men went up against a Monroe or a Douglas.

Red's eyes were blue and straight. They glowed and gleamed with downright honesty. His wide mouth had a good-natured twitch. Monroes nor Douglases had not been people that smiled much. This redhead wore two guns and had a cat-like suppleness of body, all sinew and lean muscle. Monroe believed that blood ran true to breed. A fighting heart never came from weakling sire or dam. But after all a gunfight was rather like a gamble. He had seen fellows who didn't have downright grit get cornered and shoot their way out, being lucky. Rats bit terriers and got away.

Now if Red had known, or believed, that Monroe had that letter, he would very likely have up and told him the whole story. But he didn't believe it, and so didn't want to drag in Buck Waxman, giving away Buck's secret. So Red stood fast, rolled a cigarette, and waited.

Monroe, in turn, was wondering if this Red knew, or believed, that he was Monroe's son. He did not think so. Monroe had very readily guessed from what he had learned, and from what he knew of Waxman's handwriting, that Buck Waxman had sent for the boy; but Buck Waxman was a close-mouthed fellow. And honest. So Monroe wasn't really as angry as he tried to feel toward Buck.

Monroe's deepest and most earnest thought was, "I've

got to make 'im show me what's inside of him. If he's got a yellow spot big as a dime hid away, I'll bring it out!"

Monroe said coldly, "Where the hell you been! Keep me waitin'!"

Red, with unlighted cigarette at his lips and a match on its way, paused. He shook the match out and dropped it. With twitch of lips he spat out the cigarette.

"Mr. Monroe, us bein' sorta strangers, I reckon you don't know 'bout my sent'ments. I ain't used to bein' cussed—'cept when I got it comin'."

"Meanin'?" Monroe inquired with deepening frown.

"Jus' that," said Red softly, with a slight nod, and with a gaze that met and held the hard look of menace glowing in Monroe's dark eyes.

Men who heard and saw wriggled uneasily, getting nearer doorways, casting glances toward the shelter offered under tables. But nothing happened—or rather something amazing did happen; that is, Monroe did nothing. He said simply, "Let's take a walk, Peters."

"Yessir. But 'f you don't mind, would you call me Red? Most folks do. I'm sorta used to it."

On the instant Monroe's eyes lighted with an ominous gleam. "Red" was a name that he didn't want to hear or use. He understood that "Frank Peters," being a recently assumed name, wasn't as yet quite familiar. Red couldn't instinctively feel like answering when he heard it.

"I'll call you by the name you gave me, Peters!" said Monroe.

"Fair 'nough," Red admitted, feeling that the joke was pretty much on himself and really wanting to grin a little. One did not easily grin in Monroe's presence.

Monroe started out, and Red went with him. Men stared with questioning eyes, not understanding. This boy, so to speak, had slapped Hamel good and hard in the face, and had stood up to Monroe himself. Now the two of them were going off together, taking a walk. When Monroe had something to settle with a man he did not take him off to one side, out for a walk. He settled it wherever they chanced to meet, quickly.

Monroe led the way around back of the hotel where a

saddled horse stood, and the animal flicked up its ears as it glanced toward Red.

"Your horse?" Monroe asked.

"Mine."

"Were you gettin' ready to ride some place?"

"All the notion of any place I've had in mind for to ride to, was wherever you sent me," said Red.

"Yes. But you'll ride the horse I give you," Monroe answered. "Men who work for me, they take what comes. An' I sorta got a preference for them that stay in the saddle."

"Lot o' times I ain't stayed," said Red. "There ain't no hoss but some man can ride 'im. Ain't no man but some hoss can spill 'im. Bein' lucky, I'm fair to middlin'. Leastways, I ain't never lit yet on the back o' my neck—though comin' down on the seat o' yore pants is bad enough. Me bein' sorta skinny, the bones rattle when I hit."

Monroe eyed him and scarcely knew whether he did not like, or liked very much, this good-natured kind of chatter. At least it showed that the boy had good nerve and didn't brag. Monroe detested nervous men and loathed braggers.

Red saw Mrs. Wyman's anxious face peering out of the back door; then she went away, but he had the feeling that she looked many times without being seen.

Monroe walked around to one side of the shed, pointed to an overturned bucket, and said, "Set down, Peters."

Red sat down. Monroe, with thumbs in belt and hat pushed back, leaned against a post of the shed and looked at him.

"Now tell me again, an' careful, just what happened last night from the time you hit town," he said.

Red told him, fairly and honestly with one exception. He made no mention of the letter, and he concealed the identity of Jerome Douglas, and concealed, too, Buck Waxman's confession. He told of meeting Waxman and all about that. Monroe got the idea that Waxman had not yet disclosed the information that he had written the

letter and so brought young Jerome Douglas down to Tajola. Buck himself had perhaps wanted to try the boy out first. That Red admitted having known Buck before and elsewhere seemed reasonable enough to Monroe. Buck would likely have moved about the country and made a point of meeting, looking over, sort of studying the boy that he believed was Monroe's son. Monroe was exasperated at Buck's trick, but not really angry about it.

So Monroe did not try to trip Red up, or press him to tell about the things he was plainly concealing.

"Now," said Monroe, "we'll walk some more. Come on with me."

Red was a tall boy, but he did not come more than shoulder high to Monroe, who carried himself straight and had square shoulders. He held his head high in a stiff-necked sort of way.

Together he and Red went tramping up the street, much like two strangers that happened to be going in the same direction. Folks saw them and turned to watch.

Near the corner of the General Store, Monroe stopped and pointed. "See the blacksmith shop over yonder? You go across over there an' wait till I come."

Red went along over to the shop where a big man with bare hairy arms, with pounding of hammer on an anvil, was shaping horseshoes. A scrubby little Mexican boy tugged at the bellows.

A fine-looking powerful horse with a roving wild look in its eye was tied to a post near the blacksmith shop.

"Howdy," said Red.

Blackie looked up. "So you're him, hunh?"

"Or 'nough like him not to argue about it," said Red agreeably.

Blackie looked from Red to the horse and back again. Then he shoved the horseshoe into the coals, swore at the little Mexican, who began to pump briskly, and putting his two great calloused hands on his hips, glared at Red.

"So you think you c'n ride Hellbender, hunh?" said the blacksmith with a kind of menacing jeer.

Red turned squarely about and looked at the horse

with new interest. A powerful beast, long of leg, deep-chested, thin of flank. Hellbender had a well-shaped head and wiry neck, but was wall-eyed and nervous, a man-hater. So this was what Monroe was going to put him up against.

"Yourn?" Red asked.

"Mine!" said Blackie, and reaching up to a shelf he lifted a small canvas bag and dropped it with metallic clink on the anvil. "An' I got me three hundred dollars, gold, right here, that you can't ride 'im! An' there'll be other fellers down here with as much 'r more to bet the same. He's killed better men that you'll ever be. That there hoss ain't never been rode! He ain't never goin' to be but onct, neither. The day he is, I kill 'im!"

Red grunted.

"What you mean by that *Unh?*" The blacksmith imitated the grunt, glowering.

Red eyed the big dark bad-tempered blacksmith. "You et somethin' that didn't agree with you, or what?" he asked.

"Don't get funny! Don't get funny!" Blackie warned, growling far down in his throat and frowning.

"It's you that's actin' funny. Dang funny. But somehow I don't feel like laughin' much. What you riled up about? You tryin' to throw a scare into me so I won't get on that horse?"

"If you got good sense you won't!" The blacksmith added ominously, "When you git throwed, he'll tromp on you!"

Red looked the horse over carefully.

"Monroe, he must have it in f'r you," said the blacksmith. "That's why he had me bring up this here horse. He ain't never been rode."

"Yeah, an' you've worked careful for to make a killer outa what was born a good horse."

The blacksmith jiggled the little canvas bag, rattling his money.

"You goin' bet you c'n ride 'im? Here's three hundred dollars!"

"I ain't strong enough for to stand the strain o' carry-

in' round no such lot o' money as all that. It weighs you down. Makes you unhappy. You jus' can't be happy till you get rid of it. Leastwise I can't."

The blacksmith snorted, put the canvas bag back on the little shelf, took down a bottle of whisky, gulped a time or two, swore at the little Mexican, then fished out the red-hot horseshoe and began to hammer.

Pretty soon a man came riding slowly from town. His horse, a beautiful roan, came along as if half asleep, with head down and feet almost dragging. The man in the saddle was old, lean, loose-jointed, round-shouldered, and rode as if he did not have a backbone.

Red called out impulsively, "Why, hello there, Buck!" then realized that this was not old Buck Waxman, but somebody who looked mighty like him.

The horseman without a flickering change of expression in his face rode right up to where Red was standing and looked down with keen narrow eyes that peered from a faceful of wrinkles.

He spoke with a slow monotone of a drawl. "Don't be callin' me no insultin' names. All my life I been mistook for that damn fool, the which, seein' how ugly he is, shore is hard on my self-respect."

"Oh, then you're Bill Waxman?"

There was not a twitch of expression on the Zee Zee foreman's face. He peered with keen gray eyes at Red, looking straight into his face for a long time. Old Bill was not quite sure of what to think. Monroe had told him everything, and had showed him the letter. Red did not look quite like old Bill thought a son of Monroe ought to look, but he did look range-born and bred; and the foreman of the Zee Zee was a good judge of men.

"So yore name's Peters?"

Red nodded. Somehow he felt it was less like telling a lie if he just nodded instead of speaking.

"Are you much good at ridin' broncs, son?"

"I've set on a few."

Old Bill eyed him with moody scrutiny, then said: "Be honest with me, son, and speak up truthful. It's more important than you think. So if you ain't jus' about as

good as any man that ever hugged leather with his legs, up an' say so. Mr. Monroe'll forgive you for bein' sensible enough not to try—yeah, a whole lot sooner 'n he'd forgive you for gettin' throwed. 'Tain't no disgrace not to climb a hoss. Now me, I wouldn't climb that hoss for a thousand dollars. He'd break my ol' bones like a bull goin' through a brush pile. But it's a powerful disgrace, after you've climbed a horse, not to stay there."

There was a sort of kindliness in old Bill's low voice that warmed the roots of Red's heart.

"Maybe I won't ride 'im, Mr. Waxman, but 'f I don't you'll say a good job o' tryin' was done."

Old Bill took his time about replying, and all the while his keen gray eyes peered searchingly at Red's face; then he spoke:

"If you git on that hoss, you stay there. No matter how, you stay there. Don't you come off. Mr. Monroe, he's a mighty queer man."

"Blackie over there says he ain't never been rode."

Old Bill took his time about answering. He looked toward the blacksmith shop, toward the horse, back at Red. "I reckon that's right," he said. "Only the reasons that have caused some men to git throwed ain't goin' apply none to you. I'm havin' a man bring down yore hoss an' saddle. They ain't goin' to be no grease smeared on yore saddle blanket. An' if yore cinch busts it won't be 'cause somebody's nicked 'er with a knife."

Old Bill swung off his horse and dropped the reins. With shambling drag of feet he went to the blacksmith shop.

The blacksmith called out heartily and with much respect, " 'Lo there, Bill. How're you? Come down f'r to see Hellbender kick the dust in that galoot's face? Haw, haw, haw! Say, was Mr. Monroe sorta jokin' when he said he halfway believed he had a young feller as could ride 'im?"

Old Bill, not answering, leaned against a post.

Blackie thrust the cold horseshoe back into the coals and reached down his bag of dollars, making them clink.

"Three hundred dollars. That's what I'm bettin'."

"Sack full o' washers," said old Bill.

"Washers! No, sir! Look here!" The blacksmith opened the bag and held out the gold.

"Three hundred dollars," Bill mused, eyeing the horse, then looking across to Red. "Hmm. I'll take it."

"You!"

"Shore."

"Put up 'r shut up!" said the blacksmith aggressively. He didn't much like betting against old Bill, who was a smart man.

"Ain't my word good?" Bill inquired mildly with a pin-point sort of light in his old gray eyes.

"Well — er — yes — but —" Blackie wanted to hedge. Maybe after all this kid was a good rider. And if old Bill Waxman was backing him, there wouldn't be any chance to play tricks. "Of course, Bill, if you know the kid, why then maybe I'd better keep my money in my pocket."

"I never laid eyes on 'im before. But I took yore bet."

"You never laid eyes— Then how'd you know who he is?" The blacksmith was confused, also a little suspicious. He didn't dare even remotely hint that maybe old Bill was not telling the truth. For a mild man, Bill could be amazingly disagreeable.

"Mr. Monroe hired 'im." Old Bill had nothing more to say.

The blacksmith took down his bottle of whisky and offered it. Old Bill shook his head. The blacksmith threw back his head and gurgled.

Red squatted down off to one side and eyed the powerful Hellbender.

"I don't feel happy," said Red to himself. "I'm what you call an imposticator, 'r somethin'. That there name Peters don't set right. An' the truth is I *have* been throwed. But a lot o' time I ain't been, too. A nice big dab o' glue on the seat o' my britches might come in handy."

CHAPTER IX

A Certain Gang Lays Low

WHEN MONROE had left Red on the street he had gone to the Cross Bar Saloon where his foreman, old Bill, was sitting on the sidewalk with his back toward the building. Old Bill commanded about as much respect as any man on the range and had less dignity. He was a lonely, modest, retiring old codger, watchful as a hawk and quiet as a sulky Indian.

"Learned anything?" Monroe had asked.

"Nothin'," said old Bill. "But if Hamel didn't put them fellers up to it las' night, I reckon they calc'lated he wouldn't tear none o' his hair out when he learned what they done. Hamel, he's goin' be plum fuzzled, Mr. Monroe, from wonderin' why you're all het up over a shootin' scrape here in town when they's been dozens before an' nothin' much said."

"This is different, Bill. The boy's horse is up back of the hotel. Have it taken down to the blacksmith shop. An' go on down yourself. Maybe last night in that gunfight he was just lucky. But there's no luck to ridin' an outlaw. I'm going to see what kind of a heart he's got. An' if he quits, gets throwed, shows yeller—to hell with 'im!"

"Well, I been throwed, an' so've you. We've sorta managed to hold our heads in the community some, anyhow."

"This is different. Different, because—Bill, if he rides that horse to a standstill—you want to know what I'll do?"

"Yeah."

"I'm goin' over to Judge Tiller an' make a will. I'll know the boy's real Monroe!"

Bill had solemnly scratched an ear as he watched Monroe turn and go through the wide double doors of the Cross Bar Saloon. Then he had raised his hand and a wiry young puncher with a thin hard face and eyes like beads came at a jog trot from across the street. He

was a bad one, this half-breed Sam, but he had a doglike affection for both the Waxmans, and especially for old Bill.

"Sam, you ride up back o' the hotel. They's a hoss there, saddled. You switch saddles. Understand? Then you ride down to the blacksmith shop. You ride the stranger's saddle. An' you set in it till I come over an' tell you to git down. Understand?"

The half-breed shrugged a shoulder and grinned.

Monroe walked into the Cross Bar Saloon and stopped short. It was a wide room and seemed dim to anybody who entered from the bright sunshine outside. There were many men standing about, some of them Hamel's riders.

Monroe scarcely glanced at them. He spoke to the bartender. "Where's Hamel?"

"Hamel? Oh, he ain't come down yet, Mr. Monroe. Still asleep. Do I call 'im for you?"

"No," said Monroe. He started on back through the long barn-like saloon.

His back was no sooner turned than the bartender took up a slender stick about eight feet long. When Monroe had passed from sight the bartender began thumping the ceiling: *tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.*

He paused, looking up, waiting. From overhead, faintly, there came slow answering taps.

"What's that little game, Slim?" a man inquired.

"Oh, I was jus' lettin' the boss know he was about to have a vis'tor. One he ain't partic'lar anxious for to see, neither."

"Is there liable for to be trouble?" a man asked in a low voice, leaning well over the bar.

The bartender eyed the man with an expressionless stare, then slowly winked.

"He's jus' got ever'body bluffed, that's all," said another man, looking in the direction Monroe had gone.

Monroe went up the back stairs and along a dim, dusty, narrow hall where there were rooms for private

games of poker, and some with bunks in them to stow away drunks.

Up near the front of the hall Monroe struck on a door.

"Yeah?" Hamel answered. "Who is it?"

For an answer Monroe shook the latch against its bolt.

"Oh, you!" said Hamel. "Jus' a minute, Mr. Monroe, till I get my pants on."

"Never mind your pants."

When Hamel opened the door he was slipping suspenders up on his shoulders and his hair was tousled, and he tried to blink as if he had just awakened.

Monroe strode in with a quick glance all about. He turned a straight-backed chair around, straddled it, and sat down, folding his arms on the back of the chair. He looked up steadily at Hamel.

Hamel was fat and blowzy, with sagging jaws and dark, crafty eyes. In some ways he was a smart fellow, up to all sorts of nimble trickery. But right now he was uneasy. Gun and belt were hanging over the back of a chair within easy reach, but they might as well have been a mile away for any move that he would make for them in Monroe's presence. It would have been just about like backing up to a husky Missouri mule and trying to outkick him.

"Hamel, did you send Crawley up to that fellow's room at the hotel last night?"

"Never!" said Hamel, looking amazed.

"Where is Crawley?"

"Hell fire, I don't know. Ain't he down to the barn?"

"If so, would I be asking where he is?"

"Who says I sent Crawley up there? Did Crawley go an' tell any such story? Wait till I git my hands on that drunken runt! An' what's this all about, Mr. Monroe?"

"Where are them two gamblers?"

"They lit out last night right after that poker game. If I'd suspicioned they was cheatin' I'd shore've fixed 'em. If they's anything I hate, it's a cheatin' gambler. You know *that,* Mr. Monroe!"

"You're a damn fool," said Monroe coldly. "You're as crooked as a dog's hind leg, Hamel. You've stole right

and left from the county all these years. Most politicians do. That's why I've backed you up; you're no worse than anybody else would have been. I've put up with a lot from you, Hamel, and——"

"An' I've allus been yore friend, Mr. Monroe!"

"Yes, friendly enough to tell me what my enemies have been up to. And you've been damn well repaid. But if I ever get the notion that you have anything to do with shooting men in the back, I'll kill you, Hamel."

Hamel's knees trembled, but with all the intonation of amazement he blurted, "Whatever can you mean?"

"I mean somebody sent Crawley up to that boy's room last night——"

"I never. S'help me God, I didn't. Somebody may have told Crawley that I sent word for him to go, but I never. I didn't know a thing about it. You ask Crawley. Jus' ask 'im."

"I will when I find him. And it was your Cross Bar men that were layin' for that boy down at the barn."

"Them gamblers must've hired 'em. I didn't know a thing about it. The gamblers was awful het up against that red-headed feller. Who the hell is he, anyhow?"

"I don't know," said Monroe grimly. "But I'm going to find out somethin' about him this morning. I'm puttin' him on Hellbender down to the blacksmith shop."

"Then he's no friend o' yourn?" Hamel exclaimed with a loose wobble of thick lips. He sounded relieved. "But ol' Buck Waxman knowed him." Somehow, Hamel seemed to accuse Buck Waxman of knowing too much. "I wonder, can he be a detective?"

"In which case," said Monroe coldly, "it wouldn't appear to be Oliver Morgan that's been shootin' them detectives!"

"Don't you ever believe it ain't! That ol' hidestealer, he's tricky, Mr. Monroe. He's got friends settin' here in town right under our noses. He don't want his doin's looked into. I tell you, Mr. Monroe, them Morgans is still tryin' to shoot you—in the back!"

Monroe's lips tightened and his eyes gleamed. About

three years before in this same Cross Bar Saloon Hamel had emptied a shotgun into a half-drunken stranger, who with both guns out had risen up to take a shot at Monroe's back. That, and other things scattered over a period of twenty years, had made Monroe feel that Hamel was pretty much his friend. Hamel made out that he knew that this drunken stranger had been hired by Oliver Morgan to kill Monroe. Monroe never quite believed that. He had been having trouble with the Morgans. He appeared to be always having trouble with the Morgans; but as much as he hated the tribe, he could not quite believe that old Oliver Morgan would hire somebody to murder him.

Some people, talking privately among themselves, said it was queer that Hamel, who wasn't quick with any sort of a gun, should happen to have a shotgun right handy just at the big moment. Some—though they never let Monroe know of it—said they halfway suspected that the stranger had been a man Hamel wanted to get rid of and so had put him up to trying to kill Monroe. Some people didn't put any low-down dirty trick above Hamel.

"I've shore been yore friend, ain't I, Mr. Monroe?" said Hamel, looking humble and abused. He knew that gratitude was Monroe's weakest spot.

Monroe stood up and pushed the chair aside. "Yes, and I've been yours!"

"I hope you still are an' 'll allus be, Mr. Monroe."

Monroe growled vaguely. He did not like Hamel, had never liked him, but somehow had always felt indebted to him.

"An' was it you, Mr. Monroe, that wiped out them fellers down to the barn last night?"

"Since when do you think I've took to lyin'?"

"Oh, I never meant that, Mr. Monroe."

"I said I rode in an' found 'em dead. An' if you want me to feel you're as innocent as you appear, Hamel, you'd better bring me them gamblers' ears—with their scalps. That'll be all jus' now!"

Monroe turned and went out, slamming the door.

Hamel stared at the door, then went near it with head bent, listening to the tap of Monroe's boots as he strode down the hallway.

A door from the next room opened behind him and Hamel turned about, facing the gamblers and little shivering Shorty Crawley.

"We heard!" said Perley Price.

The younger of the gamblers, who had a wolf face, and was known as Timkins, snarled, "You shore piled it onto us, didn't you? Here's my ears—an' do you think you wanta try to take 'em to him!"

Crawley was snuffling and whimpering like a dog that had been kicked for obeying orders.

"Now, now, boys," Hamel puffed unhappily. "Me, I was in a tight hole. I got us all out, didn't I?"

"Yeah," said wolf-faced Timkins. "You knuckle down to him like a scairt kid before a teacher!"

"An' with him out o' the way," said Perley Price, "you could run this damn country yoreself, any old way you wanted!"

"What's goin' become o' me?" Shorty Crawley whimpered.

"Now listen, boys, listen. Ten 'r fifteen thousand dollars, gold, is a lot o' money, ain't it? Well, like I was jus' tellin' you when we got the signal he was comin' up, Monroe has got that gold poked away somewheres. Some years ago, when times was bad, he needed money. No bank 'r nobody'd let him have it. So Monroe he swore he'd never again be caught thataway without a pile o' cash right where he could put his own hand on it. He's got that money—twenty thousand he took out—and we ought to git it before—before anything happens to 'im."

"I think we'd better shoot 'im, then look f'r the money," said Perley Price.

"A fine chance we'd have to nose around the ranch out there with them Waxman boys settin' on the corral, watchin'!"

"Kill them, too!" said the cruel wolf-face.

"How you hope to get it?" asked Perley Price, always interested in money.

"If we git 'im off somewheres an' poke splinters under his toenails, I reckon he'd tell us!" Hamel suggested.

"That'd be worse'n tryin' to bite off the head of a rattler!" said Crawley.

"I reckon things, they'll work out all right if we move careful," said Hamel.

"You mean you're goin' to be careful to see that things work out all right for you!" said young Timkins.

"Why, we are all in this together, ain't we?" Hamel asked soothingly.

"Are we? I was jus' wondering. You pile all the blame on Perley here an' me. You done it yourself! An' we got your letter, Hamel, tellin' me an' Perley to come down here into this country an' clean up on the boys. You don't even protect your own friends. You pay men wages, then count on us takin' 'em away from 'em an' whackin' up with you. Yeah. We may have to leave the country, but when we go, we leave that letter! Ain't that right, Perley?"

The fat gambler nodded. Sweat dribbled from his forehead. He wiped his face and sat down.

"Aw now, boys, ever'thing'll be all right," said Hamel. "You jus' lay low for a couple o' days. An' now I'm goin' down an' watch that redhead git his neck broke on Hellbender. Leastways I hope so."

"I don't!" said Timkins, rubbing at a bump on his head. "I want to plug 'im!"

"You know damn well, Hamel," Perley Price said, looking up thoughtfully, "that Monroe hisself cleaned out them men over at the barn las' night. They maybe got excited an' thought it was a good chance to pot him."

"But you heard what he said?" Hamel asked.

"Yeah," Timkins spoke up. "He said you was afraid to call 'im a liar!'

"I'll have some grub an' booze sent up to you boys. Jus' lay low. That's all. Lay low."

CHAPTER X

Old Bill Lays a Bet

WORD had got about that Hellbender was to be ridden, and some of the storekeepers shut up shop. There would be very little business while that show was going on. So a crowd gathered. Men climbed up and sat on the little corral where horses were kept overnight if the blacksmith was too busy to shoe them. Others stood about, chewing tobacco, whittling, listening to the talk, now eyeing the horse, now peering toward Red.

Blackie in a loud voice was telling that he had bet three hundred dollars. Other men rattled coins in their pockets. Hellbender had never been ridden. But men were a bit shy about betting against old Bill Waxman.

Men asked Monroe which way he was betting; and Monroe coldly replied, "I ain't bettin'."

Men sensed that there was something a little mysterious in the air, but word got about that Monroe was merely trying out this redhead to see if he was good enough to take on the work of busting broncs for the Zee Zee. Monroe had queer notions.

One of Hamel's Cross Bar men, carrying a fair load of liquor, came up to Red and poked out twenty dollars. "That says you can't ride 'im, feller!"

Red did not have twenty dollars. He shook his head, not answering. He did not feel happy. If they had simply saddled Hellbender and let him climb the horse without palaver and fuss, he wouldn't have felt the least nervous; but all this rigmarole was disturbing.

"Hey, he won't even bet on hisself!" the Cross Bar man yelped, calling vaguely to the crowd. "I got twenty as says he can't ride 'im!"

Men looked expectantly toward old Bill, but he was standing near the stirrup of the halfbreed Sam and seemed inattentive. As Red appeared to have no more backing, other men drew their money. Hamel, after a private word or two with the blacksmith, patted his pockets. Offers were made boastfully.

"Time to start to begin saddlin' up, ain't it?"

"What we waitin' for?"

"We're tryin' to get somebody to take our money!" said a man who had joined with Hamel in offering to bet against Red.

A couple of men busily took the saddle off of Red's horse, and the half-breed Sam, with beady eyes aslant, watched them.

Monroe stood gloomily alone. He was in pretty much of a dark mood, half wondering if after all he wasn't putting the boy to a more than needful test. And after all if this redhead did ride Hellbender, what would it prove? Nothing except that he was a good horseman. Some of the best broncho busters in the country were not much good as men—though they had grit. No doubt about that. Yet riding Hellbender or ten Hellbenders would not change the color of Red's hair. Monroe's impulses swept him this way and that. One minute he was hopeful that the boy would ride it out. The next he felt that there would be satisfaction in seeing the horse kill him. That would confirm Monroe, almost superstitiously, in the feeling that after all this was no son of his. Monroe did not want to admit even to himself that he had been in the wrong. Yet more than almost anything else in the world he wanted to believe that his son, had come back to him—unmistakably his son, and a man. It was a terrific emotional experience for Monroe, and his face was clouded with a look that caused people to eye him and keep away.

"Ain't nobody goin' bet on that feller?" cried the drunken Cross Bar man.

"What's the odds?" a voice called inquiringly from the top of the corral fence.

"Two to one! Yessir!"

"Make 'er ten to one," the voice answered, "an' then I'll take a quarter's worth!"

The blacksmith had got his hands on the saddle and was carrying it toward Hellbender.

"Hey, Bill," said Hamel, "ain't you goin' take some o' this two-to-one money?"

Old Bill turned slowly, drawled, "Yeah?" then looked for a moment at Red. "How much you offerin'?"

"Any amount!" Hamel shouted, wanting everybody to hear.

"Yeah? Umm. Any amount, umm? Well. That the kid there can't ride 'im? Umm. Well, I'll tell yuh, Hamel. I got me a couple of hundred steers that run with the Zee Zee. Me an' my brother. Half of 'em are mine. Hun'red steers at twenty dollars a head—that'll be two thousand dollars, won't it? You're offerin' two to one, unh? I'll jus' make out a bill o' sale for my steers an' put it up agin four thousand dollars. How's 'at, unh?"

Red's heart gave a couple of jumps as if it were turning somersaults and he caught his breath.

Hamel caught his breath, too. But men had overheard Bill's offer. Hamel glanced anxiously to where the blacksmith and another man or two were spreading the blankets over the saddle that lay on the ground.

"I ain't got that much handy, Bill."

"Umm. Yuh mean you don't wanta bet?"

"I'll write an I O U against your bill o' sale!"

"Awright. There's Jedge Tiller a-hustlin' down this way so as not to miss nothin'. He'll hold stakes an' see it's all fixed proper, unh?"

The judge was a small man in a long black coat. He knew very little about law and, being a politician, was hand-in-glove with Hamel. He came bustling up, always glad of the chance to appear important.

Bill drew a worn notebook from his vest pocket, hunted about for the nubbin of a pencil, squatted down, and with the notebook on his knee laboriously with much misspelling wrote out a bill of sale. Hamel gave over an I O U.

Monroe moodily looked on, saying nothing, but his dark eyes lingered staringly on old Bill's face.

"Good gosh a'mighty!" said Red in a low voice. "Why'd you do that, Mr. Waxman? I *can* ride, but hell! Better men than me's been throwed so dang far they had to miss a couple o' meals walkin' back!"

"Why? Why, 'cause I want that four thousan' dollars, son."

"You get 'em or I turn sheepherder!"

"You wouldn't be no good herdin' sheep. You don't look onery enough. But now it is for you to 'tend to the saddlin'."

For the past half hour Red had felt like a sort of puppet that Monroe was going to stick on a horse. He had been standing by, just waiting. Now he came to life with a hitch at his belt and a jerk at his hat brim, then with long-legged stride and jangling scrape of spur started toward the horse. Men who hadn't found seats on the corral followed in a spreading circle, stirring the dust. Monroe, watching his chance, pulled at old Bill's arm. He spoke in a low, half angry tone.

"Why'd you do that?"

Old Bill looked up at him with steady gray eyes, not answering.

"I ask you a question, Bill!"

"I heard. But me, I was jus' sorta maybe thinkin' you didn't want to git answered, honest."

"I want to know!"

"You're liable to get all het up."

"Tell me!"

"The boy can ride. Look at them legs. Like a pair o' Injun bows."

"That ain't no answer."

"I know it ain't. But y'see, I'm thinkin' o' Miz Monroe. All these years your pers'nal affairs ain't been none o' my business. Ain't now, only since you've arranged this little buckin' match to sort o' convince yourself that you made a mistake years an' years ago—well, me, I'm jus' bettin' that Miz Monroe was as fine a woman as ever lived!"

Monroe's dark face was lit with a flash of anger that gleamed in his eyes. Old Bill stood awkwardly, but calm, expectant, untroubled.

"Damn you!" said Monroe.

"Yeah?"

"You and your brother——" Monroe, stopped. He

was a bitter man, a dangerous man, hot-tempered, unreasonable, yet even in anger had the appearance of being grimly cool.

"Me an' my brother?" Bill inquired with imperturbable drawl.

Down at the bottom of his heart Monroe was an honest man; cruel, at times almost senseless, a little mad or very near to madness. But he knew the Waxmans were square men, and had been his friends. For one of the few times in his life Monroe made a complete about-face. He reached out with long arm in a quick, hurried move, fastened his hand on Bill's shoulder, jerked him closer, and in a low hoarse voice said:

"If you lose that bet I pay it!"

CHAPTER XI

The Riding of Hellbender

"AWRIGHT," said Red, right up at the blacksmith's elbow, "you c'n go over there an' climb a fence post."

"Jus' stan' back, kid. We'll saddle 'im up for you." The blacksmith flourished a big grimy palm.

"Yeah, but when it comes to saddlin' a horse, it's like gettin' married. Nobody else can do it for you, satisfactory."

Men heard and snickered. Red was standing flat-footed, with hat brim up-tilted.

"Why, I allus saddle 'im f'r fellers!" said Blackie.

"An' he ain't never been rode, neither, has he?"

"See here, meanin' what?" The blacksmith swelled out muscularly, glaring.

"Meanin' any damn thing you wanta think I mean. Nobody touches my saddle but me!"

Sitting high above the huddle of men that stood about on foot, the half-breed Sam watched, heard, and grinned. He began to think that maybe he understood why old Bill Waxman had banked so heavily on this boy. The blacksmith glared, glowered, looked explosive, and at last said, "That there's my hoss!"

"An' it's my saddle as goes on 'im."

"All right!" The blacksmith pointed at the saddle on the ground. "Go to it, then."

Red eyed the saddle with an elaborate stare. "That there ain't mine."

"Ain't yores!" said the blacksmith with a sound as if he were trying to speak and drink at the same time. "It come off your hoss!"

"Yeah, an' if somebody's fist bounced off yore nose, you'd think 't was yore own knuckles, unh?"

Men chirped and cackled. The blacksmith, like many blacksmiths in many communities, was the strongest man in town; but differing from most, he was bad-natured and a bully. He was nearly twice as big as Red and could have broken his neck with one hand. It hurt his feelings to be laughed at, but there was nothing he could do about it. It hurt his feelings even worse to learn that this saddle lying there was not Red's: but there wasn't anything he could do about that, either.

"Awright, then, saddle 'im yoreself. Go to it. Let's see you. If you git kicked so you can't ride, we win all bets! You gotta saddle 'im all by yoreself, too, or all bets off!"

"You're a cockeyed liar!" said Red. "Nothin' was said about saddlin'. 'F it takes twenty men to do it, that's got nothin' to do with whether 'r not I ride 'im. Do I make myself clear? Or do you want some more information, the which I got plenty of!"

Hamel was twitching at the blacksmith's shirt. He whispered nervously.

Blackie spoke sullenly. "Don't worry none. He couldn't ride a stuffed mule!"

"Yeah, Blackie, maybe so. But he seems willin' for to try to ride *you!*"

The blacksmith turned and looked up into the beady eyes of the half-breed Sam, who grinned, then swung off his horse and began to uncinch the saddle. The blacksmith and Hamel exchanged startled looks of understanding.

Hellbender was not a horse that stood with sullen

patience and let himself be saddled, then awakened explosively the minute a foot went into the stirrup. He began fighting as soon as anybody got near enough to be kicked. He was a thoroughbred outlaw, man-hater, man-killer. It took a powerful man to hold his head, an alert, quick, cautious man to cinch the saddle.

As Red got near, the horse faced about, laid back his ears, and with long outthrust of neck, snapped.

"You son of a gun!" said Red.

The horse stood up near the post to which he was tied. This was a snubbing post staked out in the open, and scarcely ever used except for Hellbender's exhibitions. And this horse, as Red had readily guessed, was a fine thoroughbred, or at least of thoroughbred strain, intelligent as a man and as wicked. He had been trained by being tormented until he was a man-hater.

Red edged up slowly, cautiously, to get hold of the slipknot, and Hellbender snapped again. Red jerked back his arm. Men laughed. Taunts began to go up. The blacksmith's hoarse voice was loudest.

"Yessir," said Red to himself, growing hot as if with prickly heat, "I reckon I'd laugh, too, if I was settin' on the fence, watchin'." He spoke aloud, soothingly. "You Heller, you! I ain't blaimin' *you* none. But if all hosses had your disposition, cows 'ud have to get along as best they could with fellers herdin' 'em on foot. Git 'way from that post!"

Red jerked off his hat and slapped it at Hellbender's head. The horse, used to blows, jumped back with high toss of head. Red caught at the end of the rope, took a quick turn about the post, and pulled. The horse sat back stubbornly, refusing to move.

"I'll hol' the rope," said old Bill, coming up unhurriedly. "You go round back an' head 'im this way so we can snub 'im up clost. Git the blindfold on 'im. But look out. He'll kick yuh higher'n a kite!"

Hellbender, with neck outthrust in a stubborn pull against old Bill, regarded Red with a rolling eye.

"Move up!" said Red, flourishing his hat.

Hellbender answered with lash of hoof. Onlookers

cheered the horse. They wanted to see Red have trouble. It made the entertainment more amusing.

" 'F I owned him," Red called to old Bill, "I'd stake 'im out where hoss thieves was troublesome. He'd shore make a hoss thief see the error o' his ways! What I 'pear to need is a bull whip."

He yelped shrilly, again flourishing his hat, and the horse sidled off, but tugging against the rope, not giving an inch.

"Awright, awright," said Red, and went to his saddle over which the half-breed Sam stood guard.

Red took his rope from the saddle, shook it out, shaped the loop, gave it a flip behind him and a toss forward. The loop settled over Hellbender's head. At that, a few men grudgingly admitted that Red knew what he was doing. Those farthest off thought that old Bill had told him what to do; those nearer knew that Bill was saying nothing. He, as much as anybody else, wanted to see how Red would manage things.

Red walked off to one side, pulling. The horse faced him, tugging against his pull and sidling around and around. Old Bill, standing well away from the post, walked around and around, too, gently taking in the slack as the horse, pulling steadily against Red, came nearer and nearer the snubbing post.

When Hellbender found himself brought against the post he felt tricked and began to jerk and plunge from side to side. But he was caught up short, held firmly. Yet he could still bite. With ears flat against his head he drew back his lips.

"I never knowed before that the devil had four legs," said Red as he came in closer, holding an end of the rope in his right hand ready to strike. "An' me," he said, "I don't think I ever struck a horse on the head in my life!"

Red edged nearer and nearer. He knew it would do no good, but he talked to Hellbender. He always talked to horses.

"Now listen, feller, b'have yoreself. We're enemies, but don't be so dang disagreeable about it. I got to get

me a half-hitch round yore jaw. An' I'm goin' burn some hide right off yore nose if you ain't careful."

Hellbender snapped at him, barely missed, but the half-hitch caught the horse around the nose; and Red, settling back on his heels, jerked. The horse went into a spasm of jerks and pawing, but was held helplessly, being snubbed up close to the post and having a rope bound around nostrils and jaw.

Old Bill drew the snubbing rope a few inches tighter and tied it fast, then took the other rope from Red's hands.

"Does he kick when blindfolded?" Red asked.

"He does," said old Bill calmly.

"Then I reckon I'd better borrow another rope," Red suggested.

"Sam," said old Bill, "bring that saddle an' them blankets up here clost, then fetch yore rope."

Red took Sam's rope, shook it out, and walked around behind the horse. He held a small loop, watchfully. But Hellbender kept both hind feet on the ground.

"Stir 'em up a little, will you?" Red called.

The half-breed struck out with his hat and Hellbender jerked with pounding shift of feet. Red tossed the loop with swift underhanded throw, drew it tight, and settled back on his heels. Hellbender's left hind leg was caught.

Men muttered commendingly. Whether or not the redhead could ride, he was pretty good with a rope.

"You will ride 'im, I bet you!" said Sam commendingly as he took the rope from Red's hands, and swayed back.

Old Bill fastened the second rope to the post, up close. The horse was breathing noisily, with nose half closed. It sounded as if he had the distemper.

Then old Bill unfastened his big handkerchief from about his neck, folded it, bound it about the horse's eyes, and took a firm grip on both ears, holding the head as tightly as he could.

Red shook out the blanket and with long-armed reach laid it over the horse's back. Hellbender trembled and

jerked. Red drew the blanket well up on the shoulders, laying it carefully. Then he picked up his saddle, laying the stirrup, that would fall on the far side, across the seat. He heaved it up and let it drop. Hellbender struggled wildly, but with only three legs. The half-breed Sam lay back on his pointed heels.

Red stooped with cautious reach for the front cinch, and the moment he touched it Hellbender's right hind leg flashed up.

"Too slow, ol' son!" said Red, fingering the latigo through the cinch ring. He drew it tight, running overlapping folds through the cinch rings, binding it carefully with a double hitch, and sticking the end of the latigo between the folds.

Then he reached for the back cinch. Hellbender kicked again.

"You wall-eyed son of a loco wolf that was hatched while your maw had delirium tremens!" said Red.

He pulled hard on the cinch, but Hellbender was holding what little breath he had, bulging his belly.

"I gotta do some kickin' now!" said Red. He kicked pretty hard, driving the wind out of Hellbender's belly, making him relax.

A minute later Red stepped back, pushed up his hat, wiped the sweat from his face.

"I guess we're purt' near all set for to go. Can you shake loose that rope, Sam?"

Sam shook, but the loop was drawn snug between hoof and fetlock and would not loosen.

"Awright," said Red. "You hold it tight again. Here's where I put my nose right up close to heaven an' maybe git kicked inside."

He edged up close to Hellbender, stooped. Then, aided by Sam's pull on the rope, caught up Hellbender's leg and, squatting, held it back and up over his knee in the way that a blacksmith holds a horse's leg. He loosened the noose, tossed it off, then dropped Hellbender's leg and at the same time threw himself sidelong. Hellbender's leg twitched in nervous far-reaching kicks that struck out blindly.

"So far so good," said Red. He was no longer in the least nervous. He had quite forgotten the crowd, forgotten everything except that here was a mean horse to ride. He straightened his belt, with absent gesture ramming his guns deep into their holsters.

"I'd leave them off," old Bill suggested. "May git shook out. 'Sides, f'r the next half-hour I reckon maybe you're goin' be a mite too busy to know 'r care about guns."

Red loosened the holster strings that were tied above his knees, unbuckled his belt, and swung the guns toward old Bill.

"You hold 'em, Sam."

Sam took the guns, fitted the end of the belt into the buckle, and swung them over his shoulder.

Then up came the blacksmith with a big bottle sticking out of his hip pocket and a hackamore in his hands.

"Who left the gate open?" said Red, standing squarely in front of him.

"You gotta ride him with this!" The blacksmith held out the hackamore.

"Yeah? What's wrong with it?"

"Nothin!"

"Hmm." Red sounded skeptical. He reached for the hackamore and drew it through his fingers, carefully, expecting to see that it had been cut or weakened. Though a hackamore was not much good for keeping a bucking horse from getting his head down, still it helped the rider a lot in keeping his balance. "I reckon it'll do."

"I'll put it on," said Blackie. "Bill, you make ready to turn loose them ropes."

The hackamore was slipped on. The ropes were loosened. Red took the end of the hackamore in his hand and stood by the saddle, ready to poke a foot into the stirrup and swing on.

"I'll hold his ears, Bill," said Blackie. "You git them ropes outa the way."

The blacksmith took a big drink of whisky, then

grasped Hellbender firmly with powerful twist of muscular hands. The ropes were cleared. Old Bill stepped back with lift of hand, said quietly, "Awright, let 'er buck!"

Red rammed his foot into the stirrup, reached for the horn, answering, "Let 'er buck!"

And at the same moment Blackie, jerking down the horse's head, bent forward, spewed a mouthful of whisky into Hellbender's ear, jerked off the blindfold, struck the horse alongside the head and reeled back, standing clear.

Red, as he went into the air, with downward glance toward the grinning face of the big blacksmith, yelled. The next moment a misty spray of whisky flew up, shaken out by the tortured, infuriated horse. Red hit the saddle with scrambling reach of right leg, wildly groping for the stirrup. But he had met the saddle on its way up as Hellbender, with head low between front legs, clacked all four feet together in a back bend. Red went up out of the saddle as if flung. A lot of daylight showed between the seat of his pants and the cantle. For a moment he looked like a rag doll being flung by a bull pup. He swayed, reeling, with up-flung arms and came down with the jolt that sent his head lower than the saddle horn, but he landed squarely in the saddle seat and one foot still in the stirrup.

Without the flicker of a pause, Hellbender wheeled, jumped and came down stiff-legged fifteen feet away. Red reeled drunkenly. Only the bump of his knee against the saddle horn kept him from toppling. But his arms were up, away up, with awkward balancing flourishes. At least they looked awkward. Men muttered commendingly with a bubble of oaths. The redhead didn't even show the first symptoms of a leather-puller. He was taking it with hands in the air, and Hellbender was surely giving it to him.

Old Bill edged with shuffling sidelong scrape of feet up against Hamel and spoke clearly, but keeping his eyes on Red. "He ain't got his foot in that other stirrup yit, but I'll bet my brother's other hundred cows . . ."

Hamel didn't answer. His heavy face had a sort of pale expression and looked strained.

Hellbender, with downward thrust of head far between his front legs, heaved himself forward with tricky drop of left fore shoulder, and Red pitched forward. He could not get his right foot in that flying stirrup. It was about like trying to thread a needle held by a man with St. Vitus's dance. He swayed his long legs embracingly about Hellbender's body, driving the spurs deep, holding them there as tensely, as desperately, as a falling man holds onto a cliff's edge by his fingertips.

Hellbender knew as well as Red himself that only one foot was in the stirrup; and he did not pause in any sullen thoughtfulness about what to do next. He went into the air with bucking heaves that made a whipcracker out of Red's neck, snapping his head until he was as dizzy as a man half drunk. But Red had locked the long rowels of his spurs into the cinch, and though he still reeled like a dummy, you couldn't have slipped a fried egg between the bottom of his pants and the saddle seat. No doubt about it, he knew how to ride. Hellbender understood that just as quickly even as Monroe, who stood with a gloomy stare. His dark, hard face was as tense as if he faced a pair of guns.

The boy could ride, the horse could pitch. It was a matter of grit. Hellbender had been cruelly trained never to quit. Always, somehow, he had dumped his rider. The saddle would turn or cinch strap break. His head was on fire from the burn of the whisky. He was like he was—a horse gone mad. With upfling of heels he swung his head around and snapped at Red's leg, gashing the leather of his chaps. Red, with all the strength he had, pulled on the hackamore, trying to keep the horse's head curved backwards while with the other hand he flailed the quirt. He wanted to teach the brute that biting didn't pay.

Hellbender went into a series of stiff-legged plunges, bending his back in convulsive humps. He switched ends, spinning almost like a kitten chasing its tail, until Red was drunk with dizziness. But his muscles had been

trained from childhood to the saddle, to instinctive balance and sway, to cling with grip of knee and prod of spur. His blunt rowels tore the hide of Hellbender, digging in.

Then it came—the thing that everybody who knew the horse knew would come. The trick had killed two men and made a cripple out of another. Hellbender knew one way of making any man get out of the saddle. He began with a series of short stiff-legged jumps, wheeled, and with upward toss of head and frantic pawing of forefeet threw himself straight up, and toppled backwards. It was a crash that almost jarred the life out of the horse, but would jar the life out of any man that was caught. Red was almost caught. As Hellbender reared, Red struck with the quirt, trying to make him lower his head and drop forward. Most horses that topple backwards do it accidentally. Hellbender came over purposely, and came quickly; he fell with the toppling thud of a thousand pounds, spattering the dust. Red swung away clear of the saddle as he was falling. He landed on both feet with heels braced for a heaving jerk on the hackamore, but lost his balance, stumbled and fell. But he held to the hackamore, and with cat-like scramble and jump got into the saddle as Hellbender heaved his haunches up. This time Red's feet found the stirrups in the second's pause between the time he landed in the saddle and Hellbender went into the air. Men broke into yelps, cheering.

Some of his fury seemed to have been taken out of the horse by the fall. It had jarred him. It had not hurt the rider at all. After a few bobbing jumps he reared again as if to try it once more. Red, on the lookout now, and better braced with both feet in stirrups, heaved all of his weight forward and beat the horse's head with the quirt. Hellbender dropped his head almost to the ground and settled down to the steadiest bit of erratic pitching that Red had ever met.

Red's nose began to bleed and he had a pain in his side. The buster's stitch-in-your-side. It made breathing hard. Hellbender seemed to know it. He ripped off stiff-

legged hops that jarred like a hundred kicks from big boots, then he would switch ends and go into the air and come down with all four feet together on a spot no bigger than a cowboy's hat. Red coughed, spitting blood. Everything was, to his eyes, just a hazy blur. His head was snapped about as if his neck were broken. "Can't last forever!" sang through his brain, but not of himself. He knew that the most powerful horse must tire. It was just a matter of sticking. Every joint in his body seemed cracked.

At last Hellbender stopped, stiff-legged, with head down, sullenly, heaving powerfully. He had to get his breath. Every nerve and muscle in Red's body rejoiced at this pause, this breathing space. He wanted to fold his arms on the horn of the saddle and just die, right then and there. But he knew that while he was resting, the horse would be resting, too. It was a matter of grit as to which won out.

"No, you don't!" said Red drunkenly and he raked Hellbender from shoulders to flank and with long-armed undercut snap of quirt caught him under the belly, making him jump, making him buck.

At that men shouted with shrill yips. Some waved their hats. Some on the top of the corral lost their balance in the excitement of standing up to cheer. Not a muscle of old Bill's face changed. He peered steadily through bright gray eyes, half hidden by wrinkles—peered now toward the horse, now toward Monroe who stood as if frozen. The half-breed Sam fairly jumped up and down. He had flung his hat away. The big blacksmith stood with knotted fists, glowering, and Hamel's face was the color of butcher's paper.

Most of the men had never seen such riding, none of them would claim they had seen better. Hellbender was tired, but he had a fighting heart. Again and again he tried to bite, only to get his face cut with the quirt that raised welts and broke the skin. He bucked, but without the elastic snap that had made him so hard to stay on at first. Yet it was just as hard, even harder, to stay

on now because Red was tired, more than tired. It seemed that no spot on his body didn't ache.

Hellbender jumped, hopped about, stopped again. Red cursed him. The rowels brought blood, the quirt struck. Hellbender took it with sullen stubbornness. He was not quitting, but he was resting. Red knew it would not do. They would have it all to go through again. He reached forward and raked Hellbender's neck with his thumbs and the horse went into the air as if dynamite had exploded under his feet.

Then the onlookers did go wild. That any man would take all Hellbender could give, then thumb him, set them off like a bunch of drunken Indians. They slapped old Bill's back. They poked Hamel in the ribs with elbows. They jeered Blackie. They stamped and waved their hats, howling.

Hellbender bucked in a straight line for some two hundred yards, then paused, but spurs, thumbs, and hat roused him again. He yielded to the pull of the hackamore, turned, jumped stiff-legged, then his jumps became a gallop that weakened quickly into a sluggish sullen trot. Hellbender had been ridden.

Red guided him right into the crowd, and with hazy searching of blurred eyes spotted the blacksmith. Men fell back as the horse came up. They stopped yelling. They even stopped talking, almost stopped breathing. Red was covered with blood. He looked half dead. Yet there was a gleam in his eyes that meant trouble. He said, "Whoa!" pulled with the hackamore, and Hellbender stopped, dropped his head almost to the ground, and heaved as if his heart were broken.

Red swung from the saddle and staggered as he took three or four steps, then stopped before the blacksmith. What Red said was confused. His mouth was dry and his lips were bleeding. But he cursed Blackie. "Whisky . . . horse's ear . . . you dirty . . ." Red's hands dropped vaguely toward his hips, reaching for guns that were not there. When he found he was not armed, he stepped closer with stumbling lurch and his fist went out and up in a sudden drive straight into the blacksmith's face. He

didn't have strength enough left to have choked a cat, but he had anger enough to have fought a dozen men of Blackie's size and weight. Cries went up, and some men with scrambling reach snatched at the blacksmith's arm, but too late. He drove his big fist squarely into Red's face.

CHAPTER XII

A Mighty Smart Hoss

When Red came to he stared up into the black beady eyes of the half-breed Sam who seemed to be holding a rock ready to drop it onto Red's face. Red shut his eyes and jerked his head sidewise. Water dribbled into his face. What had seemed a rock was a sponge. Red's head was lying on the half-breed's arm.

"Gosh!" Red mumbled, struggling to sit up. "You tryin' 'o drown me?"

Other men were standing about. They spoke quietly, staring. Old Bill bent low, peering. "You all right, son?"

"No," said Red, "I ain't." And sitting up with a dazed wobble of his head, he peered, blinking. "Where's that damn Blackie?"

Two or three voices answered at once. The half-breed's was the loudest.

"Dead!"

"Monroe shot 'im," said old Bill calmly.

"Shot 'im?"

"An' didn't miss me more'n six inches!" said one of the bystanders, measuring the distance between two palms.

"Never said a word," another man put in. "Just shot!"

"Yeah, an' Sam here had his gun out an' comin', too!" said a voice.

"You bet," said Sam cheerfully. "Anybody, they hit my pardner they hit me, savvy?"

"Gosh!" said Red feeling confused. He ran his fingers gingerly over his face. "Do I look like I feel?"

"You mus' be feelin' purty bad, then," one of the men agreed.

"I'm jus' plum freckled with sore spots all over me."

"An' my cinch strap was half cut in two!" said Sam.

"It were that," another man put in.

Men had examined the razor-like slanting cut of Sam's latigo, which Blackie had thought belonged to Red. The blacksmith had been willing to see a man killed in order to win his bet.

"Have a drink?" said Sam.

It was the blacksmith's bottle. Red took it, raised it toward his mouth, paused, stared at the bottle, then flung it aside.

"Not outa the same bottle, I don't!" Then peering up at the faces above him, "I don't blame a hoss f'r anything he can do," he said. "An' that hoss could do a plenty. But any man as will spit whisky in a hoss's ear—he needs killin'!"

"You bet!" said the half-breed. If Red had said that black was gray, Sam would have chirped up and made it good with a fight. Red had a double claim on the dark half-breed's affection. He was old Bill's friend and he could rope, ride, and was willing to shoot. All of which appealed to Sam's primitive sentiments.

"Hellbender, I reckon," said one of the men, "is now yore hoss. Nobody else'll be claimin' 'im."

"Gosh a'mighty," said Red, "I'd sooner ride a wagon load o' dynamite."

"Put a saddle on dynamite, you could ride 'im. Yes-sir!" said Sam.

"I reckon he'd come purt' near bein' in the saddle when it come down," one of the men suggested.

"He dang near rode Hellbender one-legged," another commented.

"Well, 'twasn't 'cause I wanted to. I was sure reachin' wide an' fancy for that stirrup. I thought somebody'd stole it. I went so high I could hear angels singin' 'Here he comes!' "

Red stood up, pulling at his clothes. They were sopping wet. He was covered with mud and blood. Sam had

plunged the blacksmith's big horse sponge into a bucket of water and squeezed.

"Where's Mr. Monroe?" Red asked.

"Him an' Judge Tiller, they went off up town for a little talk," said old Bill quietly.

"My gosh, but didn't Hamel look sick!" a man remarked.

"Think you're ever goin' git yore money, Bill?"

"I think so, mebbe," said old Bill.

Red looked toward the snubbing post. Hellbender was there. He had meekly let himself be led and tied. He was still saddled.

"Why didn't somebody unsaddle 'im?" Red asked.

"We was sorta busy with things happenin'. 'Sides, he kicks like hell."

"Bring up some water, somebody. He's near dyin' f'r a drink."

Red went up to the horse and Sam followed with a bucket.

Hellbender lifted his head slightly and dropped his ears back. Red set the bucket down in front of him, and stood by, waiting. The horse sniffed it, hesitated, seemed suspicious, then drank.

Red, with slow reach, put out his hand to scratch Hellbender behind ears. At the first touch the horse jerked up his head, startled. He perhaps had never felt a gentle touch from a man's hand.

"Listen, you Heller, you!" Red's words were abusive, his tone gentle. "I think yore hide's stuffed with dynamite an' gunpowder, but——"Again Red's hand went out to scratch the ears, and again the horse flung up his head. But he did not snap. That was a whole lot from Hellbender.

Sam started to uncinch the saddle, but the horse kicked with upward sweep of left hind leg, and Sam jumped back, swearing.

Old Bill walked up slowly, but had no sooner touched the stirrup to lift it to get at the cinch than Hellbender kicked at him.

"I reckon," said old Bill, "we goin' have to rope his legs."

Red stepped up near the horse's side, reached slowly for the stirrup, and pulled it. Hellbender threw back his ears and swung his head, but did not kick. Red gently pitched the stirrup across the saddle seat. Hellbender's foot twitched, but he did not lift it.

"Yeah," said Red, pleased, "you know who rode you, don't you?"

He patted Hellbender's shoulder, lightly. "Listen, you jus' go on thinkin' I could do it again, will yuh? I don't think so myself, but I wanta sorta keep it a secret from you."

Red fingered the cinch, keeping an eye on that murderous foot, which rested so uneasily. Red loosened the cinch. Hellbender stood motionless. Red pulled at the saddle. No move from the horse.

"You layin' for me? Wanta git me when I ain't expectin' it?"

He loosened the other cinch. The horse shifted nervously, but did not kick. Red pulled off the saddle. The blanket came with it and fell to the ground. Hellbender jumped sidelong, startled. Then he shook himself from tail to ears.

Red put down the saddle, picked up the blanket and tossed it behind him. The horse eyed him suspiciously. Red stepped up, with hand out. Hellbender sidled off. Red edged nearer, talking. His fingers touched the horse's neck. Hellbender flinched. Red followed, moving gently, talking. After a half-dozen attempts the horse stood still as Red patted his neck. Red's fingers went up behind the ears, scratching. Hellbender showed his teeth, but did not snap. Gradually Red's hand slipped down on the horse's face, rubbing at the welts. Hellbender stood silently submissive.

One of the bystanders started around behind the horse. Instantly both heels lashed out. The fellow staggered back, not hit but barely missed. He cussed goodnaturedly as other men laughed at him.

"Mighty smart hoss," someone said. "He knows who rode 'im."

"Somebody bring me a brush an' currycomb?" Red asked.

During the next half-hour, Red went over the horse from nose tip to hind fetlocks. Hellbender flinched and sidled, put back his ears, his legs twitched, but he did not bite or kick.

"I jus' got me some wonder," said Red, "if I can saddle 'im again?"

He picked up the blanket. The horse threw back his ears with outthrust of nose and bared teeth. The blanket fell. Hellbender jumped but did not struggle. Red laid on the saddle. He drew the cinches.

Men mumbled in astonishment.

"Now 'f I had me a bridle?" Red suggested.

Sam brought his own.

Red adjusted the cheek straps and held up the bridle. Hellbender set his teeth. Red cautiously poked a thumb into the horse's mouth, well back of the teeth, prying. The bit slipped in. Hellbender champed and shook his head.

He fastened the end of the hackamore to the saddle horn, fitted his foot into the stirrup, and swung up. Hellbender jumped and came down stiff-legged, but stopped still. Red clucked, patting his neck. The horse started off in a slow, dispirited walk.

Men swore, amazed.

"You see," said Red, as he swung off, "he has been rode before. He's bridle wise. He's been bad used and spoiled. Now he 'pears not to hold no grudge. He don't act happy a-tall, but he does act willin'. An' that there is the best quality man 'r hoss can have! Ain't I right, Mr. Waxman?"

"Son," said old Bill, grinning a little, "right now my sentyments about you are such as I'd agree with most anything you said!"

"Yeah!" a man spoke up. "You put four thousand dollars in ol' Bill's pocket."

" 'Tain't there yit," said another mumbling skeptically.

The men who overheard the remark made no comment, but understood clearly what was meant. Hamel was tricky. He would sooner let go of his own leg than of a thousand dollars. Red and Sam, being busy with Hellbender, had not overheard. Old Bill, of course, had heard what the man said but did not reply with word or look.

"Now me," said Red to old Bill, "if you think maybe I'm goin' have some wages comin' one o' these days. I'd like to buy some duds. I don't mind havin' my shirt washed once in a while, but I sorta like to be outside of it at such times. Liable to git soapsuds in yore eyes."

"You c'n buy the store an' put it on yore back if you want," said old Bill.

CHAPTER XIII

Red-headed and Ganglin'

RED, accompanied by old Bill, Sam, and another man or two, took the horses to the Stage Company barn, where Red looked about with a good deal of interest at the bullet marks men pointed at and talked about.

On the way up the street to the General Store they met Mr. Monroe and Judge Tiller.

Monroe talked a little, in a more kindly tone than most men had heard him use, and looked at Red with an expression very close to affectionate pride, even dropping a hand on his shoulder.

But the judge eyed Red with pop-eyed interest, was loud with commendation, and hurried to offer a lighted match as Red rolled a cigarette.

"I'm going up to the hotel to talk business with a man," said Monroe. "You come along up, son, after you get some new clothes."

Out in front of the General Store was a buckboard. A man, as if old Bill did not notice everything that came within range of his eyes, pointed and said, "Some o' the Morgans 'pear to be in town. Some o' the lady folks, I reckon."

Judge Tiller, who had come along with them after leaving Monroe, said, with waggle of long black coat and pompous voice, "I will take pleasure in introducing our young friend to Martin and assurin' him that the boy has plenty of credit, plenty of credit!"

Old Bill, Sam, and the others then went on toward the Cross Bar Saloon, having it in mind to collect the four thousand dollars from Hamel.

Inside the store the judge made a sort of Fourth of July speech in explaining to Martin, the owner, that this boy had ridden Hellbender, had won the devoted friendship and admiration of Mr. Monroe, and that anything he wanted, "Anything, sir!" was to be charged against Mr. Monroe's account.

Judge Tiller settled back on his heels and waved a palm, quite as if ending a speech before a crowd.

At that moment a curly-headed cowboy with dark eyes and a good-natured face, who had been reading off a grocery list, edged up close and peered hard at Red's battered face.

Then the curly-head looked as if he were about to explode with excitement, and yanking off his hat he slapped it over Red's back.

"Well," he shouted, "I'll be gosh-darned horsnwoggled an' jiminy-cracked if it ain't ol' Red Clark o' Tulluco hisself! Well, you ol' piece o' pizen weed, you! Dang my hide! How's all the home folks?"

"Harry Stow!" gasped Red.

Red and his old friend, who was also from Tulluco, pumped hands, slapped each other on the back, almost embraced, gave a fair imitation of an Indian war dance, and young Stow let go of some whoops that seemed to quite paralyze the amazed judge, who rocked back on his heels with mouth open and long coat tails aflutter. The storekeeper edged away anxiously, wondering if the Stow boy had not tanked up on whisky which was just beginning to take effect.

"An' it was you, was it, that rode that there hoss I been hearin' about?" Stow shouted. "Well, if I'd a-got to town a little mite sooner I might o' saved 'em the

trouble o' exercisin' that pore ol' animule by tellin' these here Tajola folks what I know o' Red Clark an' his ridin' abilities! Why, you c'n ride anything that's got a belly f'r a cinch to hold to! Hell's bells an' the devil's whiskers, but I'm gosh-a'mighty glad for to see you, Red!'

"Well, since you're gettin' so dang personal," said Red, "I'll throw that there compliment right back in yore face. What you doin' here?"

"Me? I'm workin' f'r the best outfit in the country. Ol' Oliver Morgan. I jus' drove in Miz Morgan an' one o' the girls this mornin', an' am gettin' some grub."

Red clean forgot all about his name being, or supposed to be, "Frank Peters," and was joyful at having met up with a fellow he had known from almost babyhood.

A few minutes later Judge Tiller got Harry Stow out in the alley back of the General Store and asked questions.

"How long have I knowed Red Clark?" said young Stow. "Why, ever since I was big enough to crawl! I used to steal the bottle outa his crib. Yessir. Me an' him was twins awmost!"

"You knew his people?"

"Knowed 'em? Knowed ol' Sheriff Clark o' Tulluco! Why, the sheriff used to spank me all the same as if I was his own son! There weren't a finer feller ever lived than ol' Sheriff Clark, an' his son is jus' like 'im."

Judge Tiller had much cunning and listened encouragingly. Stow gladly told all he knew about Red, with enthusiasm and praise.

Then the judge with hasty trot of short legs and flap of coat tails went straight up the alley to the Cross Bar Saloon. He fidgeted nervously on the back stairs while a fellow to whom he had spoken went up front and spoke to Hamel.

Hamel was up at the bar with old Bill Waxman waiting sort of patiently but firmly to be paid four thousand dollars, while the beady-eyed half-breed, Sam, lingered close by. Hamel was sweating and puffing. He acknowl-

edged the debt, though with a rather hasty murmur he did try to point out that, when Hellbender fell, Red had got out of the saddle! Old Bill's steady gray eyes did not flicker, but Sam's beady ones snapped. Hamel did not stress that technicality. Red had stayed in the saddle while the horse stayed on its feet, and that was riding according to the rules of the range. But Hamel pointed out the scarcity of gold. Four thousand dollars. Why, the Cross Bar Saloon itself wasn't worth four thousand dollars!

"Give me time!" said Hamel.

"I give a bill of sale on my cows," said old Bill. "'F I'd lost, you'd a-had yore men ridin' out by this time for to round 'em up."

"I'll pay. I'll pay, of course. But be reasonable, Bill."

It was then that a man plucked at Hamel's sleeve and whispered.

"A feller wants to see me. I'll be right back," said Hamel.

Judge Tiller was hopping on one foot, then on the other, as if he stood on a hot griddle. He reached forward, buttonholing Hamel, and whispered excitedly, "I've just detected one of the biggest swindles ever attempted in this here country, Hamel! Let's get where we can talk!"

They went upstairs and into one of the unused back rooms. The floor, long unswept, was so covered with dust that their feet left much the same sort of tracks as if in light snow. The windows were grimy. The judge jerked off his broad-brimmed black hat and beat at his face, fanning himself.

"Monroe made me promise never to speak of this, Hamel, but something has come up," said the judge. He was a fidgety little man who never did anything without being advised, backed up, supported; and in nearly everything that came up he consulted with Hamel. "Monroe, sir, he thinks that red-headed boy is his own son!"

A look of amazement spread over Hamel's heavy face.

He had heard clearly enough, but asked, "What? What's that? What'd you say, Judge?"

"Yessir. After that ridin' this mornin', sir, he came to my office and made out a will leaving everything to his dear son, Jerome Douglas Monroe. But," the judge added hastily, "you mustn't let on that I've told you!"

Hamel put out a hand gropingly toward a chair. His brain felt a little blurred, but one thing he understood clearly enough: that was why Monroe had been so mysteriously angered by the attempt to kill the boy.

"But," said the judge, bending forward and half whispering, "he's no more Monroe's son than you are! There in the store just now . . ."

In less than five minutes' talk, the judge and Hamel, by putting what they thought were two and two together, came more or less sincerely and with great excitement to the conclusion that the Waxman brothers and this Red Clark had rigged up a swindle on Monroe.

"And they would have succeeded but for me!" said the judge, unconsciously poking out his chest and standing as if awaiting some applause.

Hamel slapped his hand palm down on the dusty table and gazed broodingly into space. Then, almost admiringly, "I never thought them Waxman boys had so much brains!"

"Or could be such scoundrels!" said the judge indignantly. The judge was not a very honest man himself, but seemed so through always being indignant at rascals.

"I got it!" said Hamel, bringing his fist down on the table as he arose. "You fetch that Stow boy here. Me, I'll hustle up to the hotel an' git Monroe. I won't let on that I know anything more than that you've sent me. Monroe an' the Stow boy can talk. That'll fix them Waxmans an' that red-headed skunk!"

Hamel was excited by the honest feeling that for once in his life he was exposing somebody else's trickery.

As Hamel left the back way and hurried up to the hotel his tricky brain buzzed. He saw a way to wriggle out of paying Waxman any part of the four thousand dollars. Moreover, in a hazy sort of excitement he vague-

ly saw—or thought he did—how it would be possible to steal the Waxman boys' idea for swindling Monroe. Hamel really felt a little disappointed with himself that he hadn't thought of the trick himself, long ago. If Monroe died, then he, Hamel, using the judge's influence, could run in almost any young stranger as Monroe's son, sell off the Zee Zee cattle, water, and land, divide the money, and get out of the country. That was something to think about.

As he went on to the hotel porch he saw Mrs. Morgan talking with the doctor and young Margie Morgan standing by. Hamel bowed and lifted his hat, but the two women eyed him coldly.

He went in and called Monroe aside.

"Mr. Monroe, Judge Tiller, he's all excited," said Hamel. "He says for me to come an' git you quick. He says he's jes' learnt who that redhead feller is. I don't know jes' what he means, but he says the feller ain't a-tall who you think. He's got a man that knows who the redhead is, an' is waitin' f'r you to come an' talk to 'im!"

Monroe's face grew dark. He eyed Hamel as if angered, then pulling down the brim of his hat, said, "Come!" and started off, making Hamel trot to keep up with his long-legged stride.

On the porch he passed the Morgan women without looking toward them, and they stared after him without friendliness.

Upstairs over the Cross Bar Saloon, in the same dusty back room where Hamel and the judge had talked, the judge was now waiting with young Harry Stow.

Young Stow knew Monroe by sight and had no liking for him. He began to feel a little as if he had sort of been trapped up in this back room with these three men. The judge, friendly with all men, was more or less friendly, too, with Oliver Morgan, so Stow hadn't minded talking to him. But Hamel and Monroe were different.

"I gotta go. Miz Morgan'll be wantin' me."

"But Mr. Monroe here, he has become very interested

in your friend," said the judge smoothly. "He has hired him. He would like to know just who the boy is. He has planned to do a great deal for your friend."

"He's Red Clark o' Tulluco. One o' the best fellers that ever lived—and I mean it!"

"You have known him a long time, I believe?" the judge inquired.

"We growed up together."

"Just what has he ever done to make you admire him so much?" said the judge coaxingly.

"He's square. He sticks. You c'n bank on 'im. Miz Morgan don't know where I am, an' she's wantin' to make an early start. I'll be goin'."

"You say," the judge queried, "that he is the son of the sheriff of Tulluco?"

"O' Sheriff Clark, yessir."

The judge looked up intently at Monroe, whose face was tense.

"Anything you'd like to ask, Mr. Monroe?"

"Did you ever know his mother?" Monroe asked.

"She died when he was a tiny kid."

"Does he look like his father?"

"Him? Yeah. Red-headed an' ganglin', with the same eyes. Only the sheriff was a feller that didn't laugh much. Red's full o' fun. I gotta be goin'. Only I'll tell you this," said Stow, looking straight at Monroe, "you never seen a man so gosh-blamed willin' to fight as Red is when he's riled, an' he won't back down from the biggest man livin'. An' he's hones'—jus' like his ol' dad the sheriff! An' listen, when bank robbers 'r road agents got off with somethin' an' Sheriff Clark went after 'em, he'd come back with whatever it was the fellers stole. There wouldn't be no five or six hundred dollars missin' like when most sheriffs recovers the loot! I gotta be goin'."

He left, glad to get away from them, and walked with heavy thump of boots. He felt that he had surely spoken up for Red in a way that would help men to admire him. But he, in his loyalty to Oliver Morgan, was a

little regretful that Red had thrown in with the Monroe outfit.

When Stow had gone, no one said anything for a time. Hamel turned to a window and tapped the dusty sill thoughtfully, trying to pretend that he wasn't curious. The judge, a little furtively, watched Monroe. Monroe, with hat pushed back, stared at the doorway through which young Stow had passed.

Monroe spoke coldly, without looking around. "That paper I had you make out this mornin'—tear it up."

"I'll do that, sir!" said the judge.

Hamel glanced about quickly, meaning to catch the judge's eye. But Tiller did not notice.

"You can't trust no man, ever!" said Monroe, barely aloud, and bitterly.

"I'd never 'a' suspicioned them Waxman boys!" the judge murmured.

"There's no doubt as to what they was up to," Monroe agreed calmly. "They brought 'im in here to fool me. Ol' Bill knew the boy could ride! That's why he backed him so heavy this mornin'. They had me fooled."

"An' look at the way that Buck Waxman cut an' run!" said the judge. "He was scairt the plot had been knocked to flinders!"

Monroe nodded.

"Why, what's all wrong, Mr. Monroe?" Hamel inquired solicitously. At the same time he gave the judge a wink.

Monroe told him his suspicions. Hamel displayed astonishment and indignation. "I never did trust them Waxman boys, never!" he remarked.

"I don't know what to do," said Monroe, dropping into a chair and staring moodily toward the floor. It was unlike Monroe to say that; it was unlike him ever to hesitate.

"Do!" said Hamel, popping his eyes and puffing his cheeks in his best effort to show amazement that Monroe would not promptly get into action.

"I liked that boy. I sure did!" said Monroe sullenly.

"I sure didn't!" Hamel blurted.

"An' the Waxmans—I allus trusted 'em," Monroe added.

"Can't trust no man!" Hamel declared. "Them Waxmans meant to kill you. Kill you, an' run in that redhead as yore son! An' "—this was oily solicitousness—"they know, don't they, where you've got yore money hid?"

Monroe nodded.

Then Hamel nodded, repeatedly, just as if something he suspected had been proved. He murmured huskily, "Shore are deep ones, them Waxmans!"

"I think I'll have a talk, private, with old Bill," said Monroe.

"He'll lie like hell!" Hamel urged hastily. "Won't he, Judge?"

The judge was helped to answer emphatically by a nudge from Hamel's elbow. "Indeed! Most assuredly!"

"I reckon there can't be no doubt," Monroe said, reluctantly though. "They must've meant to kill me an' steal the ranch. An' they damn near got away with it. I'll just go down now an' have it out with Bill. Then with that damned redhead."

"That's the talk, Mr. Monroe! Ain't it, Judge?"

The judge, not liking to be poked in the ribs by Hamel's elbow, stepped hastily to one side, but he affirmed that Monroe must attend to the matter in his usual direct manner.

At the first opportunity for a furtive whisper Hamel said, "Don't you tear up that will, Judge! Don't do it! I've got an idea. You bein' administrator an' all—a great idea!"

CHAPTER XIV

Not Likely to Die With Boots On

RED, finding his credit was good in the store and seeing a lot of nice things, splurged. He felt so battered, bruised, and knocked about that some gay trimmings

seemed needed to set him off. He stuck a sportive broad stamped leather band on the crown of his old hat, tied a broad red and yellow silk handkerchief about his neck, got into a gay blue shirt, bought himself a pair of buckskin gloves—which he would never wear. He bought a new pair of blue pants and a pair of chaps—without fur, fringe, or bat wings, but lined down the seams with conchos. Then he got himself a new pair of stamped leather straps for his spurs. Red had a bit of a weakness for finery. The interested storekeeper tried to get him to take new cartridge belts and holsters, but Red balked.

"No sir! I like to look nice an' all that, but I'd rather git married blindfolded than poke my guns into strange holsters."

Red took some boxes of .45's, and his bill came to seventy-six dollars.

That seemed a lot of money for the little doodabs, but as Red said, "Fixin's come high."

He peered at himself in a hand mirror, shook his head, and looked away. " 'F I was in a handsome men's contest I'd shore have to wear a mask."

He had been told to meet Monroe at the hotel, and he now hurried there, but he hadn't gone far before he wished he had on his old boots. These were handsome, highly polished, but they pinched. The flap of the gloves in his belt annoyed him, so he stuck them into a hip pocket. The hatband was heavy. The silk handkerchief about his neck was light and fluttered. The spur straps didn't sit quite right.

As he came up to the hotel porch he saw a pretty girl standing there, all alone. She looked at him with calm frank interest. She guessed who he was, having heard about the redhead who had ridden Hellbender. But Red got all warm inside and embarrassed. He knew he had a black eye and a bruised cheek.

By the look of her she was a range-bred girl, and all this new finery must—he thought—make him look like a fool tenderfoot in her eyes.

He had turned his back on her and was making for the barroom when he heard a shout, "Hey, Red!"

Harry Stow came up at a run, overtaking him, and began talking when still some feet away.

"Say, Red, a funny thing! I'm shore yore friend. Monroe, Hamel, an' that Judge Tiller got hold o' me an' asked all about yuh. I tol' 'em that ol' Red Clark o' Tulluco was—— Why, what's the matter?"

"You shore have spilled the beans an' put yore—I mean my foot in it! I never thought to tell—I couldn't've told you! Harry, don't you ever go an' do nothin' dishonest, 'cause us fellers that ain't got the habit are plum sure to—— Lord gosh! but I ought've lit out with ol' Buck last night! I wonder where I c'n find him? I'd like for to snuggle up in his blankets—snores an' all!"

Then Red heard a cool pleasant voice, "I know where Buck is. If you have a message——?"

He turned and faced the girl.

"This here is Margie—I mean Miss Morgan," said young Stow with a vague sort of proprietary air.

"You know where he is?" Red asked.

"He came over to the ranch, early this morning. That's why we came to town. About the boy that was hurt. We are taking him home with us."

"What boy?" Stow asked, surprised and not exactly delighted.

"The boy that was shot last night. Buck and Mother had a long talk. With Dad."

"Is he out to yore ranch, miss?" Red inquired anxiously.

"No, but I know where to find him."

"Where?"

"I can't tell you. But if you have a message?"

"Awright, you tell 'im I want somethin' nice put on my tombstone! You tell 'im it's knowed all over town that I'm Red Clark o' Tulluco. You tell 'im the last you seen o' me I was makin' tracks—long ones!—down to the barn for my hoss!"

"I don't understand," said the girl.

"He will. An' he'd better shed plenty o' tears 'r I'll haunt 'im!"

At that moment the red-nosed doctor came bustling down, saw Harry Stow, and said briskly, "Mrs. Morgan says for you to bring up the buckboard. And put plenty of straw in the bed. We are ready just as soon as you get here."

The doctor went back into the hotel. Stow, with a blank sort of look, turned inquiringly to the girl. "What's all that mean, Margie?"

"We are taking the hurt boy out to the ranch. Mother and Dad are awfully excited about him."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know. But you had better do as Mother says."

With that she ignored the poor boy who jealously worshiped her and turned to Red, asking, as young Stow went off, "Whatever is wrong?"

"Wrong?" said Red, grinning. "Nothin' much—only if I can't run faster'n Monroe can shoot I'm likely to get some holes in my hide. Yes'm."

The girl frowned, mystified; then asked brightly. "Are you joking? You don't appear very scared. What have you done?"

She was a pretty girl and friendly.

"Miss, I can't tell you. But maybe Buck, he will. Cross my heart an' hope to die 'f I've done anything much wrong—so far. In a way it's kinda funny. Another way, 'tain't!"

"If you are a friend of Buck's you couldn't do anything really wrong!"

"I'm glad for to have you think so, but us men, we're terrible deceivers. Take ol' Buck hisself. He looks so solemn an' sorta timid, yet he eats fried wildcats all peppered over with tacks."

The girl laughed, then remarked earnestly: "The Waxman boys are all that has kept us Morgans from having a lot of trouble with Monroe. My dad thinks a lot of them and so does my mother. I know Buck better than Bill, and I like him. Oh, there are some men riding up, and look how they look at you!"

She was a girl of the range and—in spite of some schooling in the East—had the sensitiveness of the range-born for anything that looked like trouble.

Red turned, looking toward the two men that had come up at a trot and now drew rein in the street right at the front of the hotel. He recognized one of them as Frank Sterns, a Cross Bar man who had been in the poker game when the trouble started. The other he didn't know, but did not like his look. From what he had overheard the night of the shooting in the barn, Red knew that this Sterns had had a hand in shooting at the boy through the window.

"Git back!" Red said to the girl. "Maybe they's goin' be some argyment."

The horsemen eyed Red. They seemed to be waiting, purposefully. With a jerk of rein and prod of spur they kept their horses sidelong to Red. He suspected that their right hands were touching guns. But they said nothing. It was as if they waited for a signal.

"Was you hombres lookin' for somebody of about my size an' age?" Red inquired.

They eyed him steadily but did not answer.

Then Red learned what they were waiting for. The girl cried, "Look out behind!" He spun about in time to see two men come stealthily from the barroom doorway. One was a gray bleary-eyed man with a badge on his vest. "Sheriff."

Then things got mighty confused and blurred. Hamel, knowing that Red had gone up to the hotel, had sent the sheriff and some men to surround the building and get him. But Monroe had at last told that it was Red who had shot the men down at the barn. So the sheriff and the men who came with him were expecting trouble.

Red saw a drawn gun in the sheriff's hand and heard him say, "Put up yore hands!"

Red, being an honest boy and a sheriff's son, had a lot of respect for the law. For the most part, sheriffs were to be trusted, even bleary-eyed ones. But he didn't like the look of this one, nor like the way he had brought so

many men along with him. That seemed a sort of acknowledgment that he wasn't much good as an officer of the law. So Red hesitated just long enough for an eyelid to flicker a couple of times. The girl cried out, "Here're more too!" and other men came from around the end of the porch.

Red was cut off in every direction. Evidently nobody expected him to put up his hands. The sheriff's order was nothing more than a signal. The two horsemen shot almost together, but Red had jumped. He flung himself back to the wall and both guns were blazing.

There were oaths, yells, the startled crash of glass in the barroom, and the pulsing tramp of feet. Guns roared. Men dodged at posts. Some went off the porch in such a hurry to get to a safe place that they fell as if they had been shot.

Red poured his guns at the horsemen. At the first shot, Frank Sterns threw up his hands, and the gun he held flew up as if thrown. His startled horse jumped, and Sterns toppled backwards with one foot in the stirrup. That scared the horse and it bounded away, terrified by the thing it dragged.

The other horseman reeled, cursed, and with both hands pulled at reins and horn as if hanging onto his life while the horse with startled stiff-legged sidling edged across the street and stood still. Then the man slid off slowly, head first, and lay as if sleeping in the dust at his horse's feet.

Red was caught on the porch between two groups of men, two on one side and three on the other. All in all they had brought seven men to get him. And while he was between two fires and the air was filled with bullets, that gave him a sort of advantage because he was hard to hit. Such bullets as missed him went by and sang into the ears of other men who were shooting at him.

Loud voices bawled confused orders. Red did not know how many there were after him. He got a blurred glimpse of the Morgan girl pressed tightly up against a post, and her mouth was open as if she were calling something, but he didn't hear what she said.

Whenever guns started to go off, Red had a way of keeping busy, and he shot fast, banging away to the right and left and knocking splinters into the faces of men that had ducked off the porch and ventured to peer over. The noise of the guns sounded as if a lot of men were in action, and all up and down the street people who had heard the shooting began to appear. Red thought they, too, were coming after him; and it surely looked bad.

His hat, with heavy band and all, was shot away. His new shirt was ripped right across the breast, and the right heel of his new boots had either been shot off or knocked off in a knot hole so that he had the swaying limp of a cripple. There wasn't a horse handy or he would have tried to hit a saddle and go. He had tried to keep count of his shots, for he had been trained to think that was about as important as shooting straight; but in the confusion of banging away now to the right, now to the left, and trying to answer every shot that came at him, he lost track and his hammers snapped on empty shells.

That surely looked like the end. Men, taking good care to protect themselves, crouched at the end of the house and below the porch. Some of them had bullet holes in legs and arms, and the Cross Bar puncher who had jeered at Red just before the riding of Hellbender, now lay all spraddled out, dead.

Red did the only thing there was to do. He wouldn't surrender and he couldn't run; at least not far. He left the wall, took three long jumps, and whirled inside the hotel doorway, scattering the startled occupants with the threat of his guns, and went up the stairs. Halfway up he met the red-nosed doctor, who, at the sight of Red's guns, yelled as if the devil had come to claim him and started back up the stairs. The doctor was a bit fat, but he went like an antelope except that he let out yells such as no antelope ever made.

Mrs. Morgan had come down the hall to see what all this shooting was about. She lived in dread of the range war that seemed always about to break out between

Monroe and the Morgans. The doctor, sprinting madly, almost knocked her over. She thought at first that Red was chasing him. Mrs. Morgan was a brave woman. She also knew that no puncher would harm a woman. She put herself directly in front of Red, stopping him.

"What's the matter? What's happened? Why are you after him?"

"After who?"

"The doctor!"

"I don't want no doctor—yet! You're Miz Morgan, ain't you? There's a lot I'd like to tell you, but I ain't got no time. Monroe—Hamel—the sheriff—I've messed their men up some. Tell Buck our little show is all busted up, an'——"

"You are the Clark boy from Tulluco!"

"Yes'm!" Red was prodding at empty shells. "An' I'm goin to get into a room an' make a stand. They're awful pore shots. Sorta hasty-like an' shut their eyes when they pull the trigger!"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Morgan, thoughtfully. Then with shove and push, "Into this room here. And under the bed. Quick!"

"Me crawl under a bed!"

"Quick, I'll help you. I know all about you. There's no other way!"

"But under a bed!"

She half pulled him into the room, his own room. The boy, Jerome Douglas, lay feverish and unconscious on the bed.

"Quick!" said Mrs. Morgan. "I hear them coming. Get under the bed. You'll be all right."

"Under a sick man's bed! I can't!"

"Don't be a fool just because you're brave! Listen to me! This boy's mother and me"—she swept her hand at the unconscious form on the bed—"were friends. I'd do anything for him, or to spite ol' Monroe! Get under that bed. Buck's goin' to need you!"

Red got down on his belly and started to crawl. It was dusty under that bed; hadn't been swept for weeks. The dust got into his nose, and he had to pinch it hard. It

got into his throat, and he swallowed fast to keep from choking.

Mrs. Morgan had stepped just out of the door in the hall and was scolding: "You men ain't got no feelin's a-tall! A boy up here dying, an' you—— What's all this shootin' about!"

"We're after that desperado, Miz Morgan!" It was the bleary-eyed sheriff speaking. "He killed some o' my men an' come this way. Right up the stairs an'——"

"I *did* hear somebody runnin' through the hall. You look careful, maybe you can find 'im! I'm goin' take this boy here that was shot last night out to the ranch an' cure 'im. I'll want some help pretty soon in carryin' him down to the buckboard on the mattress."

"Awright, Miz Morgan. You jus' holler when you're ready an' we'll help you. But now where could that feller have gone!"

"Into some o' these rooms maybe," said Mrs. Morgan. "That hall window is up back there. Maybe he jumped out!"

Mrs. Morgan stepped back into the room and with the door half shut peered out at the men who with much hesitation had begun to open doors. They would open a door, jump back, and say, "Come on out! We've got you!" If there was no answer, then they would peer in, look behind the door, under the bed and in corners, then go to the next room.

A crowd had followed up into the hall, but hung well back, not wanting to be near when the shooting started. They knew that Red would shoot.

Margie Morgan came up with hair in a tangle and eyes bright. "Oh, Maw, you ought to have seen him! That old sheriff there is scared right now that he will find him!"

Just then at the end room of the hall there was a commotion, and voices shouted, "They've got him!" People surged forward, then somebody laughed. It was not Red, but the red-nosed doctor. He was trying to tell that Red had chased him down the hall. Believing just that, he persuaded others that it was true. The sheriff then

peered through the open window at the end of the hall.

He decided that Red must have jumped out of the window and would be hiding in some of the buildings out back.

"I'll stay here an' keep a watch-out f'r 'im!" said the sheriff, posting himself at the window.

"Yeah, it's safer!" somebody called.

The sheriff pretended not to hear.

It was then that everybody was excited by the news that there had just been a shooting scrape in the Cross Bar Saloon, and a good many people rushed right off down there.

Monroe had accused old Bill Waxman, his foreman, of trying to run in an impostor as his (Monroe's) son. Old Bill had simply stood wide-mouthed and motionless, not in the least knowing what it was all about. He hadn't even made a move when Monroe reached for a gun. But the half-breed Sam had not hesitated. He drew and shot Monroe, striking him in the hip, putting him down. In all the shooting scrapes that he had been in, that was the first time Monroe had ever been hit. In falling, he shot and killed the half-breed. Then old Bill, with empty hands, had walked right up to where Monroe lay on an elbow with gun leveled, and had said, "You can kill me if you want, but anybody as has been tellin' you I've played any tricks is a liar!"

Something about old Bill, his downright honesty, the honesty of all the years that Monroe had known him, was impressive. Monroe did not shoot, though Hamel, standing well to one side, drew his gun and would have fired had somebody not caught his hand.

Then Monroe said, "You men take care of Bill and see that he don't get away. When we catch that Red we'll get the truth out of him! Out o' both him and Bill!"

Then Bill said, "Nobody don't need to hold me. I'll stay right here as long as anybody wants for to see me."

But they took away Bill's guns and held him as a prisoner.

CHAPTER XV

A Handsome Buckaroo

THE red-nosed doctor was hurried off down to the Cross Bar Saloon to take care of Mr. Monroe.

Mrs. Wyman was harshly indignant at the commotion that the sheriff and his men had made in her hotel. She told the sheriff in good round loud tones that he was going to have to pay for the damage done to her windows, since some of them in the front of the house had been shot out.

The sheriff said that he 'lowed Red had busted as many of her windows as anybody. She came back at him in a louder tone than ever to say, "Nothin' of the kind! 'Pears like from the number o' men that have got holes in 'em that boy didn't waste no bullets breakin' winders! An' if you hadn't hid yoreself like a turtle in its shell, I reckon yore ol' hide would be punctured, too. Like now, you say you're goin' stay up here an' look outa the winder while other men nose about for to find 'im! An' me, if you want for to know how I feel, I hope nobody finds 'im! I think he's a lot honester than the men that are lookin' for 'im. So there!"

The sheriff looked sort of uncomfortable, got red as if suddenly sunburned, told a man by him that women were like a lot of cackling old hens, and allowed that Red couldn't have gone far because he had been hit as everybody could see by the way he limped.

Then the sheriff and other people began to go downstairs.

Mrs. Wyman stopped to express her feelings to Mrs. Morgan, and Mrs. Morgan pulled her by the arm into the room, saying, "Come in here." To Margie, Mrs. Morgan said, "You watch here at the door," then she closed it.

"Mrs. Wyman," she said, "I need your help."

Then Mrs. Morgan stooped down and looked under the bed.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"I want to sneeze," said Red.

"Good gracious!" said Mrs. Wyman hastily dropping to her knees. "Why, that's him!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Morgan, "I heard how you talked to the sheriff."

Red poked out his head and looked at the two women. Then he sneezed, rubbed at his face with a dusty hand, sighed deeply, and said, "I reckon I ought to be thankful to you ladies, but it's awful hot under here, an' dusty. 'Sides, I've got my guns reloaded now."

Margie, hearing a man's voice, opened the door and peered in. At first she was astonished, then she laughed because Red did look funny with his head out from under the bed and his bruised face streaked with dust.

"Oh, Maw, what are you going to do with him?"

"Take him home with us," said Mrs. Morgan. "I've thought it all out. He can lay down there on the mattress beside this boy, and we will cover him with blankets and have the mattress carried to the buckboard and——"

Red was coming out from under the bed with hasty scrambling. He stood up, shook himself, stamped on his heelless boot, and backed into a corner.

"Not me, you ain't! No'm. I don't hide in no hurt man's bed! No'm, I'm shamed enough at hidin' under the bed. I don't know what I'm goin' do, but I ain't goin' do that. No, sir-ee! No, m'a'm, I mean!'

Mrs. Morgan, who was a forceful woman and used to having her own way, tried to argue. Margie coaxed. Mrs. Wyman pointed out that it would be best. But Red backed farther into a corner and shook his head stubbornly.

"Then what are you going to do?" asked Mrs. Morgan.

"I don't know persackly, but I got me a notion that I'd like to plaster Hamel's hide on my saddle, the same as you do a rattler's. For an ornament!"

"They'll kill you!" said Margie.

"No'm. They're poor shots. An' folks that are skinny an' can run fast, like me, ain't easy hit."

"I can keep you here in my hotel for a time," said Mrs. Wyman thoughtfully.

"I'd shore like to stay somewhere where it's quiet an' peaceable till after dark," said Red.

"Well, if you won't you won't," said Mrs. Morgan. "I was going to take you out to where Buck is."

"You can have Buck come to town. Tell him ever'thing is knowed except that me an' him is honest. If we have to bury half the town, we got to persuade folks o' that. Yes'm!"

After some more talk in which Red still stubbornly refused to fall in with Mrs. Morgan's plan, Mrs. Wyman made sure that the hall was clear and led him to a room.

"Now if there's anything you want?" she said.

"I wanta rest an' meditate."

Closing the door and putting a chair against it, he then peered at himself in a small cracked mirror.

"You're a fine-lookin' specimen of a handsome cowpuncher, you are," he remarked. "You got a black eye, a busted cheek, an' yore nose ain't on straight. You're smeared up like an Injun in war paint. Them Morgans is nice folks, but Mrs. Morgan, she has got funny notions. But I never liked workin' on a ranch where there was women folks. They take yore mind off cows. My gosh, but I am tired! An' sore. I don't feel happy. If Harry Stow marries that Morgan girl I hope she makes 'im unhappy. Well, it wasn't his fault I was wearin' another feller's name. After this I stick to my own. I don't think I like this Tajola country much. But I can't get out till I've made folks understand that I'm an honest boy who just had some bad luck."

Red took off his shirt and boots, hung the guns on a bedpost within easy reach, poured water into the wash bowl, and scrubbed himself with much spluttering. His face *was* sore.

Towel in hand, he paused, listening. There was some sort of commotion in the hall again. He quickly dried his hands and reached for his guns. Stooping, he peered from a corner of the window, and saw the Morgan

buckboard out there, with Harry Stow holding the reins and men lifting in a mattress on the bed of straw. Mrs. Morgan and the Morgan girl were busily directing the men who were doing the lifting.

At that Red felt some little assurance that men had not returned to the hotel to look for him. The Morgans would have been more interested in what was going on; they would have been listening expectantly for shots.

Red went close to the door and listened. He could hear the tramp of feet, a kind of low hubbub of voices, and Mrs. Wyman's voice above the others. But they stayed up near the other end of the hall. Red opened his door to the thinnest possible crack and peeked.

Monroe had been shot in the hip, badly crippled, and he was being brought to the hotel to be cared for.

Red closed the door and blocked it again with the chair. He was weary, bruised, dead tired, worn out. He adjusted one gun so that the holster was low at the side of the bed, then he took the other to bed with him. He lay down, sighed, tossed about restlessly for a few minutes, but presently curled up and slept.

CHAPTER XVI

A Jail Delivery

Red awoke in darkness and stared at the ceiling, blinking hazily. He felt that he had had the devil of a bad dream in which a bucking horse had worn six-guns on all four feet and shot at him. Then he began to piece the day's happenings together and to remember clearly enough where he was and why he was there.

He felt tenderly of his face and found it sore. He moved and his legs ached. His stomach felt empty.

"No wonder I feel bad. I ain't et lately. I could eat me some bear cubs while their maw set by an' wept, I'm that hard-hearted when I'm hungry. I wonder what time o' day 'r night it is?"

He stirred in the bed and sat up. "I feel so sorry f'r myself I'd like to groan!" he mused, rubbing at the

joints of his knees and hips. "My face hurts me. I bet it's so black an' blue I don't need to wear no mask to fool folks as to who I am. I don't dare light no lamp 'cause this winder ain't got no blind."

He peered from the window into the clear starlight and listened. There was no one in sight and no sound. He drank lukewarm water from the pitcher, poured what was left into the bowl, and washed; then he began to dress.

"If I had me some whiskers I'd shore be an ol' man!" he said to himself, feeling rheumatic and stiff.

He began to put on his boots, but his feet were swollen. The boots were tight. He ran his fingers down to where the heel was missing. "If I had me a skillet I'd fry 'em. I hear tell as how starvin' men eat their boots. I guess I'll go in my sock feet—an' maybe step on some glass!"

He buckled on his guns, then drew them, working them up and down in the holsters, making sure they came easily and free.

As he drew the chair away from the door he saw something white on the floor. He picked up a piece of folded paper and moved near the window. The starlight was not strong enough for him to read by. He got down into a corner and scratched a match. A scrawling hand that wrote with a pencil had scratched:

"Folks think you got away so you are safe long as you want to stay. Old Monroe he has ofered one thousan dolars for enybody as catches you. I hope nobody gets it. Mrs. Wyman."

"I shore got hopes jus' like yores!" said Red as he tore the note to bits and stuffed them into his pocket. As he poked them deep he thought, "This here letter ain't goin' fall out an' get nobody into trouble. That's the only nice part about making mistakes. It learns you things. Me, I ought 'o be plum chuck full o' wisdom by this time. Me, I must be a smart feller to make so many mistakes an' still stay alive. Most folks don't. But I

won't be stayin' alive much longer if I don't hunt the kitchen!"

He stepped on furtive tiptoes into the dark hall. Only one stairway was in the hotel, and that led down to the front of the house. There was the squeak of boards under his feet, and in the stillness this sounded as loud as if tiny voices were trying to call out and tell that he was there.

"If I was a sneak thief," said Red to himself, "me, I'd rob only houses as had 'dobe floors." He held his breath, trying to make himself light. "I'm liable to get mistook for a sneak thief, too, goin' round this way in my sock feet!"

Under a door up near the front he saw a light. Before he got near he could hear the tone of a querulous voice. He forgot all about food and crept near, listening.

It was a woman's voice, sharp and shrill though not loud. Mrs. Wyman's voice. Red put an ear up almost against the door.

". . . you bein' bad hurt thisaway, Mr. Monroe, means you can't help yoreself. An' folks has allus been bad scairt to speak up an' tell you things, but now——"

"Shut up!" Monroe growled in a voice of pain.

"Maybe you'd better take some more o' this medicine. The doctor, he said it mightn't be strong enough for to make you sleep, but 'twould sort o' ease the pain——"

"Give it to me an' git out!" Monroe ordered.

There was the tinkle of glass and spoon but Mrs. Wyman went on talking:

"It's a woman's place allus for to nuss sick folks. That's why I run them men out an' stayed. An' if I ain't never liked you very much, still even the Morgans say you——"

"Damn the Morgans!"

"—they say yo're honest at heart, an' I know them Waxman boys is hones', so I figger——"

"Will you shut up!"

"No, I won't! Here, you drink this an' maybe you'll feel better. It's 'most one o'clock now. An' it's a shame, a powerful shame, for ol' Bill Waxman to be in the

lock-up same as if he was a drunk Mexican. An' the las' thing Miz Morgan said to me, she said, 'It's Monroe's way to mistreat folks as try to do the most for 'im, so I ain't goin' let 'im know nothin' that I know.' An' she said, jes' like I say, too, that them Waxman boys wouldn't know how for to go about it to do somethin' wrong. An' that Red Clark boy is jus' as nice a boy as ever you'd wanta find!"

Monroe shouted almost wildly, "He's killed a half-dozen men right here in town in twenty-four hours! Nice boy! You damn women——"

"An' some more o' the same kind could be spared plenty without decent folks sheddin' of a tear!"

"The Waxmans brought him here to make me think he was my son! To cheat me! Maybe kill me an' get my ranch."

"If the Waxmans done that, then I bet he is your son! Though I don't believe it, 'cause he don't look like you none, an'——"

"Get out! Leave me alone! Leave me be! Get out o' here or I'll climb right out o' bed an' crawl downstairs into the street! Get out, will you?"

"Well, if you're goin' get all riled up jes' cause somebody is tellin' you things f'r yore own good! Here's yore medicine an' water. You c'n help yourself . . ."

Red slipped off down the hall and waited near the top of the stairs. He grinned, a little pleased, at having heard Monroe tormented by a spunky woman. Monroe did not like women, anyhow.

Mrs. Wyman left the room, closing the door with a bang. When she came to where Red was half concealed in the shadows, she gasped and almost threw up her hands in fright, but did not make any noise.

"Oh, you!" she whispered, relieved. "What you doin' out here?"

"I'm starvin', Maw. Yes'm."

"You come on down to the kitchen. Foller me. I'll make sure there ain't nobody up."

Red followed cautiously. In the kitchen, before she lighted a lamp, Mrs. Wyman opened the door of the

room where the cook slept—when the hotel had a cook—and said, "You go in there an' set. Somebody might be passin' an' look in."

Red went into the little room, the door was left open, and Mrs. Wyman lighted the lamp, then talked to him through the doorway as she stirred busily, getting together something to eat.

"Now I want for you to tell me the downright truth," she said. "Will you?"

"Yes'm," said Red, and he told the story, full and complete, to the woman, who forgot all about getting the food as she stood in the doorway listening, amazed.

"Then Miz Morgan knowed who that boy was she took home with her?"

"No doubt about it."

"You know what you orta do? You orta go right up to Monroe there now an' tell 'im! 'R I'll do it!"

"Don't do it, Maw. Listen. As soon as ever I get me something to eat——"

Mrs. Wyman jumped, startled, as if reminded of a forgotten duty.

"—then me, I'll go down to the lock-up an' if there's somebody down there with the key I'll get ol' Bill out. If there ain't I'll maybe do it anyhow. Least have a talk with 'im——"

Red stopped with mouth half opened, staring at nothing. Then he swore slowly. "I'll be goshdanged damned! You know, I jus' thought o' somethin'. Old Bill, he actually believes that I am Mr. Monroe's son. I bet yuh anything he does! An' maybe when he finds out I ain't, he'll poke some holes into me with his gun. I wouldn't blame 'im much, but I don't want no holes in my hide—not even if they're made by a feller I like a heap!"

Mrs. Wyman would have stirred up a fire, but Red said anything that was chewable would be fine, whether hot or frozen. So she got some of the cold steaks that were being saved for hash, some cold boiled potatoes that were going into the same hash, some raw onions and a lot of catsup. His plate was heaping when she brought it in to him. He sat on a chair near the dim

light of the open doorway, and while she talked he ate. He said that nothing he could remember in a long while had tasted so good. He washed it down with black cold coffee, well sweetened, and said now if he had some boots he would be a new man.

Mrs. Wyman poked about in a closet and brought out some old boots that had been left by a miner. Red stepped into them and said he could hear his toes hollerin' that they were lost; besides the boots were heavy, "An' who knows, Maw, but I may want to run some?" He meditated, then decided that he would have to go forth in his sock feet.

She gave him directions for finding the jail and he set out.

The hotel bar closed at midnight, but up the street the lights of the Cross Bar Saloon were burning.

Red avoided the main part of the town—it wasn't hard to avoid, there being so little of it. He crept along through shadows and up against the side of buildings, going cautiously and well aware that his life wouldn't be worth a bent pin if anybody recognized him—from behind.

"I must be gettin' easy scairt," Red mused after he had whirled about and peered toward a cat that had jumped softly from a barrel to the ground. "I allus been taught that a nice hones' conscience would keep a feller struttin' with his shoulders up. I shore wouldn't be no good a-tall if I felt like I'd done somethin' that made me deserve gettin' shot—an' Monroe's purt near right, even if he is clear teetotal wrong, in thinkin' I been imposterin' with what law sharps call malice aforethought. From now on, henceforth ferever an' all time, I ain't never goin' use nobody's name but my own."

The jail was a squat square little 'dobe building set down off to one side of the town so that the drunken exuberance of such as were pitched into it would not annoy such folks as could carry their liquor without making a fuss.

Red knew all about cowtown calabooses, his father having been sheriff of Tulluco. Also he himself had

been deposited in a few, and had helped get friends out of many.

"I got me a notion as how there'll be somebody settin' down here sorta keepin' watch over old Bill. So maybe I'd better go crawlin' 'round pretty slow an' expectant."

He hovered motionless and stared afar at the blot of shadow the little adobe building made in the starlight, but he saw no one move. That did not mean that no one was there, sitting back to the wall, perhaps half asleep, or maybe wide awake and watchful.

Red decided to take a wide circling course and work up from behind, and so edged off, crouching low. He had not gone far through the sand before he cursed noiselessly, but with feeling, and sat down to feel for the cactus thorn that had stuck into a foot.

"I've heard about folks as didn't have sense enough to come in outa the rain, but they're smart hombres to the feller that don't wear boots in a cactus patch!"

He had stepped on a piece of dried cactus skin, and when he pulled it off a piece of the thorn remained. "Now if I can find some nice broken bottles to dance on I'll be in a plum suitable humor to talk earnest to anybody I find hangin' around this calaboose."

He went on, not finding broken bottles but plenty of sand burrs. He scratched at the soles of his feet as a dog scratches at fleas, and made such mental comments as a dog seems to make when it flops down and hastily begins to rake its neck with a hind foot.

As he came up behind the jail he heard a queer sound, a sort of gasp and groan, then silence. He listened a long time, then decided that maybe it was some drunken man having a bad dream. Then when he got up close he could hear a kind of gasping breathing. Somehow that didn't sound like a drunken man, and he couldn't exactly picture old Bill making such sounds. Red was tempted to call out in a low voice, but decided that he had better make sure that nobody was on guard, so he edged along to the corner of the calaboose. There, sure enough, was the blob of shadow in a chair that was tilted back against the wall, and the man rest-

ing there held a sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his left arm.

Red's opinion of anybody that carried a shotgun was about the same as his opinion of anybody who cheated at cards.

"Hands up!" said Red, and he spoke with meaning.

The guard went into the air about the same way as a jackrabbit does when it is shot, and came down with hands up. The shotgun fell into the sand at his feet. "Aw, don't shoot!" he begged with a kind of whiny gasp.

"Well, of all the nice folks in the world, an' for to think I've got the pleasure o' meetin' you onct more!" said Red, stepping forward with gun hip low and leveled straight at Shorty Crawley, the bar fly and stable roustabout who had brought him the false message the night before.

Shorty rose on his tiptoes so as to get his hands higher and whined, "Don't shoot! I'll tell yuh ever'thing! I couldn't help myself! Don't shoot!"

"Nope, I won't. I ain't never shot a louse, yit. I jus' step on 'em—'r crack 'em between thumbnails. Insultin' of a man like old Bill by havin' a thing like you guardin' him! Is he in there?"

"Aw, they 'most near killed 'im, an' I begged 'em not to! They wanted to make 'im tell where ol' Monroe keeps his money hid. An' he wouldn't, so——"

"Awright, go on. I'm listenin' with both ears stretched out, but my thumb's gettin' tired a-holdin' this hammer back. So you'd better talk fast—an' truthful!"

"So they—they—his feet—tied 'im—an' his feet—couldn't watch! Hamel an' them gamblers!"

"So that's it," said Red.

"Aw, don't shoot!"

"I'd tie you up in a gunny sack with a rattlesnake only I'm afraid the snake he'd git sick after the first bite! You got the key?"

"Them gamblers've got it. The sheriff give it to Hamel an' he give it to them gamblers. They've gone back to the saloon to talk over what to do nex' 'cause old Bill wouldn't talk. They say they're goin' have to take

'im out an' kill 'im some'eres so he can't tell folks what they done to 'im. But they think maybe he'll talk afore mornin'. They left me here in case somebody come down a-wantin' to talk to 'im now. But I never seen you come!"

Red shoved Crawley over near a barred window and called, "Mr. Waxman?"

"That you, son?" said a weak, weary voice. "I thought maybe it was you."

"I come down for to git you out!"

"I can't walk none. An' what's all that Monroe meant by sayin' me an' my brother has tried to cheat 'im? Them fellers tol' me Monroe was dead. I'm shore sorry!"

"Dead hell! He's just got some hip bones busted. Maybe they thought you'd give in a little sooner 'f they tol' you he was dead."

"They tol' me, too, that you'd been bad hit!"

"Me? Huh, I don't know why they'd say that when so far none of 'em ain't even had a chanct to poke me in the *back* with a bullet. You're comin' outa there, somehow!"

"My feet is all burnt an' my hands is tied, son."

"You ain't goin' have to do no walkin'!" Then to Crawley, "Come along round here, you. Le's see what kind o' lock they got on this door!"

Red picked up the shotgun, shook the sand out of the barrel, and jabbed it up against Crawley's back just to help him to feel bad. He made Crawley stand facing the wall with hands up, and examined the lock. Just a padlock, but a big one. He broke the shotgun, took out the shell, then pried with the gun barrel. The barrel bent, but the lock or the staple did not give. Red threw the shotgun away.

"Well, Crawley, it's yore pants 'r mine. So start gittin' outa yourn. I don't like for to take my clothes off in front o' strangers. You hear me? Start sheddin'!"

"Wh-a-at?" Crawley gasped.

"I'd take 'em offen yore dead body—with pleasure—only somebody has to help me carry Bill. An' if you

don't think I mean business, you jus' hesitate another half-minute—an' I'll carry Bill all by myself!"

"You really mean——?"

Red swung back a revolver and without any doubt its barrel would have come down on Crawley's head if he hadn't hastily expressed his willingness and begun unbuckling his belt.

"Usual," said Red, critically watching Crawley take off his overalls, "when I get folks outa jail, I make 'em poke out their own pants to me. But with Bill in there the situation is some different. An' I wonder would them boots o' yourn fit me? Take 'em off."

"I'll git my feet all full o' stickers!" said Crawley.

"You bet you will!" Red agreed heartily.

Red lifted a boot, eyed it, then decided he didn't want to wear it.

"You can have yore boots back, but I shore want yore pants."

He took up Crawley's overalls and began to fold them over the revolver, then held the gun almost against the lock and refolded the overalls. "Bein' a sheriff's son," said Red, "you learn a lot about things you oughtn't to do. The which comes in mighty handy sometimes."

He shot. The sound was blurred, partly muffled. At least there was no clear sharp report. Red tried the lock. The dogs had been jarred loose. He threw the overalls on the ground toward Crawley.

"If you want to wear 'em, hop into 'em lively," he said as he took off the lock and tossed it into the sand, then he pushed open the door. "Come along in here, you!"

"I ain't got my pants on!"

"Come as you are, feller! An'" —as Crawley, with one leg into his overalls, the other not in, reached for his boots—"never mind them boots. I ain't got none on. Do you good to get yore feet tickled with some stickers!"

Inside the jail Red struck a match and looked down at old Bill, who sat up against the wall with his hands tied behind him. His feet were bare, raw, blistered. All

about lay burnt matches and a piece of a candle. He stared up in silence and his old gray eyes had fire in them, but he spoke quietly.

"They tell me you ain't Monroe's son a-tall."

"I ain't. I never meant to pertend to be. His son's that boy that got shot in the back through my winder. He'd had a queer letter sayin' he was to come down here and give out as how his name was Frank Peters. After he got hit by a bullet as was meant for me, I just sorta took the name Peters for to see what'd happen. An' she's shore been happenin'. A lot more's goin' happen, too! Damn pronto. I'm goin' get you up to the hotel, then I'm goin' in an' have a little talk, personal, with Monroe. 'N I'm goin' down an' break in the General Store, get me some guns an' shells—an' get my ol' boots back. After the which I'm goin' set fire to the Cross Bar Saloon an' take 'em as they come. If you want, I'll set you in a rockin' chair cross the street out front, an' me I'll go around back. That way we'll catch 'em front an' back!"

"They burnt my fingers, too," said Bill.

"They'll be fryin' in hell, come sun-up! They're comin' back down here to try it some more, then take you out an' kill you, an' hide yore body and pertend you got away!"

Red, not at all forgetting to keep Crawley under his eye, carefully cut the thongs on old Bill's wrists.

"Now then, Crawley, much as I hate to touch you with anything 'cept a bull whip, you an' me has got to make a pack seat. Give me yore hands. An' if you make a wiggle just 'cause you think I ain't holdin' a gun ready, I'll make you bite yore own ears off!"

Crawley was anxious to please. He held out his hands. Red arranged their hands into the form of a seat. Crouching, they put their hands under Bill's legs, and he put his arms about their necks and squirmed. Then they lifted him—easily, for Bill was a rather tall but not very heavy man.

It was not easy walking, but what had to be done must be done. They slipped in the sand, Crawley whimpering at getting stuck by sand burrs. "You drop 'im an' I'll kill

you!" said Red, and meant it. Old Bill said nothing. They went on, with Red and old Bill keeping a sharp lookout for persons who might be stirring and curious. Their hands and wrists grew weary, but Crawley was afraid to complain, and Red wouldn't.

At last they came to the same barrel from which a cat had jumped and startled Red on his way to the jail. Then he said, " 'F you don't mind, Bill, we'll set you down up here a minute." So they paused to rest, then went on to the hotel, coming up to the back door. No light was burning, Mrs. Wyman having finally gone to bed, but the door was not locked. Doors were seldom locked in Tajola.

They pushed open the door and with shuffling, struggling steps moved into the darkness. Red bumped against something. It was the stove.

"We'll set you down by it, Bill."

"All right, son."

Red laid his hand on the back of Crawley's neck, holding him, to make sure he wouldn't bolt, then struck a match. He told Crawley to lift off the lamp chimney. When the lamp was burning, Red set about tying Crawley up. He did it with twisted dish towels, drawing the knots hard. Then he dragged him by the collar into the little room where the hotel cook had slept. The floor was of pine, and splintered. Crawley ventured a protest. "Shut up," Red told him. "You stood by an' watched 'em burn Bill. An' what right's a man that's goin' to git hung to care about some splinters in his settin' place? They won't bother you none with a rope round yore neck!"

At that Crawley began to beg and whimper, to say what he could and would tell about Hamel if only his life were spared so that he could leave the country.

"Huh," Red said, "what'd a smart feller like Hamel let you learn about his goin's on!"

"I've listened an' overheard 'im an' fellers talk!"

"Awright, you talk fast an' be interestin' or you'll be swung to the nearest sycamore, come sun-up. An' she ain't far away. Talk loud, too, so Bill in there can hear."

"Listen," Crawley gasped, "I'll tell yuh! They're goin' kill Monroe an' bring in somebody to play he's Monroe's son an' git the ranch! They say they got that idea from you, an' Judge Tiller, he's helpin'! 'R they say he will help," Crawley corrected in an effort to be strictly truthful.

"Can you hear, Bill?"

"Yeah, I can."

"Awright," said Red, leaning in the doorway and looking down at the terrified Crawley, "keep yore tongue waggin'. I ain't got much time for to listen."

"They're meanin' to kill Monroe an' make folks think Bill got out o' the lock-up, done it, and lit out. Then they're goin' bring in some feller to pertend to be——"

"Don't repeat yoreself thatway," Red interrupted. "We heard that before. Tell somethin' new. What else you know?"

"Hamel had them two detective fellers killed 'cause he was scairt they'd find out that 'twas him an' his Cross Bar men as been stealin' cows from Monroe. Hamel's been meanin' a long time for to kill Monroe, but he's been scairt an'——"

"Oh, shucks!" said Red. "You're jus' tellin' us now what you think will help keep yore neck outa the rope. Hamel's an awful fool—any man is as don't do right—but he ain't big enough fool to kill the only friend he's got! You stick to facts or I'll poke a gag down yore throat. A wet dishrag. They make fine gags."

"S'help me God that is the truth! Ain't I been upstairs at the Cross Bar all day an' most o' two nights with them gamblers? Ain't I heard them talk, an' Hamel talkin' to 'em? He calculated to make me light outa town last night when it got dark on account o' you guessin' I come with a phony message, an' Monroe, he was mighty peeved. But after he turned on you, an' then after he got shot, Hamel, he kep' me here in town. He's been wantin' Monroe put outa the way 'cause he's scairt Monroe'll learn about how he's been stealin' cattle from

the Zee Zee. Them two detectives had 'im bad scairt an'—"

Bill called from where he was sitting, "Jes' a minute there. Nobody knowed about them detectives but me an' Monroe. I never tol' an' he didn't. So how'd Hamel come to learn, unh?"

"Why," Crawley answered, raising his voice, "he reads most o' Monroe's mail. Gits it from the clerk there in the store where the post office is. So he learnt all about when them fellers was a-comin' an' why. I'm tellin' yuh the truth. I ain't a bad feller, hones'. I wanta go straight. But I been scairt o' Hamel. You won't let 'em hang me, will you, boys? Oh, an' another thing. Hamel, he's been laughin' there all afternoon about the joke he played on Monroe near twenty years ago about that gambler Diamond Jack O'Brien. It come up on account o' you an' yore red hair. Hamel, he's been braggin' how foxy he was to git Monroe to kill Diamon' Jack an'—"

Red interrupted emphatically. "No, you ain't a-goin' be hung, Shorty. No, sir. You're goin' be dragged by the heels right up to Mr. Monroe an' made to tell him all you know; an' if you don't persuade' im it's gospel truth, you won't live long enough for to get hung. He'll kill you shore! So you'd better be convincin'. I'm goin' right up now an' have a little talk with 'im first, then I'm comin' down after you. An' you, Mr. Waxman—they's a bunk in here, an' you'd better lay down."

"I'd like a drink, son."

"Whisky?"

"Water."

Red took a quart dipper from the water bucket and held it half filled to old Bill's mouth. He drank slowly.

"Son," he said slowly, "I ain't goin' hold no grudge agin' nobody ner feel bad if this all leads to Hamel gittin' his deserts. Hide'll grow back on my feet an' fingers. An' if Hamel an' them Cross Bar fellers are run outa the country, Tajola'll be a purty good cow country."

"Hamel may not know it," said Red, "but he's all the same as dead. Here"—Red backed up to old Bill—

"hook yoreself around my neck an' let me get hold o' yore legs. You can lay in the bunk an' listen to the music. They's goin' to be some just along about sun-up!"

He carried old Bill pick-a-back into the room and gently let him slide down onto the bunk. Old Bill hung his feet over the end of it and held his hands elbow high in the air. That position seemed to ease the pain a little. Not a word of complaint passed his lips.

"One o' the ol'-time breed, you are!" said Red.

CHAPTER XVII

A Couple of Redheads

JUST as he was leaving the kitchen, Red grabbed a cold boiled potato, hastily sprinkled it with salt, stuffed it into his mouth, and went out chewing. He was still hungry.

"All them pertaters an' steaks I've et, Miz Wymans ain't goin' have much left over f'r hash! Most folks don't like hash, so I'm doin' 'em a favor. Now me, I wonder—will Monroe have some guns handy? Most likely not—not with his hip bones busted. An' he ain't no danged outlaw to be scairt o' ever' footsteps he hears—'sides he can't hear mine. Ow, gosh!"

Red stopped, leaned against the wall in the dark, and rubbed at the sole of one foot and then the other. His socks had worn through. Bits of sand burrs had broken off and, as such things do, pricked at times with a needle-like sting. There was no way of getting them out.

He went on gingerly. In the hallway he stopped, listening, forgetful of stickers, and held both guns by the handles, ready to whip them out. He had heard footsteps, soft ones, stealthy, then low whispers.

"Now I wonder," he mused, "have they got a notion that maybe they know where to find me? What else they doin' nosin' around here at 3 A.M.? I'll shore do my best to correctify any such notions. Anyhow, this time o' night all hones' folks—'cept me—ought to be in bed!"

Red squatted low, waiting in the hallway below the

stairs. He could not see anything and could hear nothing but the faint tiptoe step of stealthy men and the slight squeak of boards, with now and then a vague whisper. Red held his breath, not moving. Then he saw the dim outline of dark shapes, very hazily. Two men. They seemed coming into the hallway where he waited, but paused at the foot of the stairs, then began to ascend. The stair steps creaked more than the floor. They swore under their breath. Red waited, patiently. He thought, "I bet a penny they're after me. I wonder what they think they'd do with me? Might be like the time I roped a bear. I learnt a lot. Learnt to leave my rope offen bears. I burnt my hands. The saddle, it turned. I got throwed off. The horse run away, an' me, I climbed a tree. Fellers," he said in his own thoughts, turning his face upward in the darkness, "it's shore bad business to go lookin' for what you don't want a-find!"

Red did not move all the time that they were on the stairs, but peered overhead into the darkness, seeing nothing. Then he sniffed, a little puzzled, wrinkling his nose. In the still hot air he had caught the tingling of a kind of barbershop odor, bay rum.

There had been bay rum on those men. And who used bay rum? Punchers sometimes when they came to town with three months' wages went in and had the barber put on all the fixin's. But gamblers, they smelt of bay rum, always.

Red gasped noiselessly. "Them two gamblers? Then they're not looking for me. They're after Monroe. They've come like Shorty Crawley said for to kill 'im an' make folks think old Bill, he done it! If all Shorty says pans out truthful, I'm goin' take it on myself for to see he don't get hung."

Red knew that he would have to wait until the gamblers got off the stairs, even got into Monroe's room, before he dared to start up. The squeaking under his feet would attract their attention. And he wanted Monroe to know that Hamel had sent them to kill him, Monroe.

"That feller Hamel, he shore knows how to get other

fellers to do his dirty work, now don't he? An' think of hirin' a postoffice clerk to give you all of a feller's mail, then you steam it open, read it, seal it up, an' give it back to the clerk. I wonder why it is skunks an' such fellers seem so much smarter than other folks? Now me, I'd never a-thought of a thing like that!"

As Red was waiting he heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs. It was not loud; it seemed far off. He cocked his ear alertly, but at that moment he vaguely heard Monroe's angry voice, then the quick jar of a closing door, and what Monroe said was cut off. The gamblers had quickly entered his room and shut the door.

Red jumped at the stairs. He was now afraid that he had done wrong to wait; afraid that the gamblers might kill Monroe quickly. He ran up the stairs on tiptoes, turned in the hall, and slowed down, moving cautiously. There were voices in Monroe's room, and the tone did not sound particularly angry. He slipped up, nearer and nearer, listening.

He could not hear very clearly, but well enough to know that the gamblers were telling Monroe things. They had caught him crippled in bed, unarmed; and one of them in a thin mean voice was saying:

"You may have other folks scairt of you, but me and Perley here, we ain't! Tell Hamel, will you, to bring you our ears! Why, Hamel, he brought us down here to Tajola to clean out punchers—his Cross Bar punchers 'specially, so he'd get back the wages he pays 'em, an' the cuts he gives 'em, for stealin' yore cows! Yore time's come, Monroe. An' it might interest you to know——"

Red kicked open the door and stood there with both guns hip low and muzzle up. His eyes were blazing, but his mouth was twisted into a joyful grin. His hair was all tousled and poking out every which way; his face was bruised and blackened. At their first glance the gamblers seemed to think he was a devil and not a man. It took two winks for them to recognize him as the lanky puncher who had cut in on their game that night in the Cross Bar.

The younger gambler, the wolf-faced Timkins, who

was doing the talking, held two guns in his delicate skinny hands. They were man-sized .45's with eight-inch barrels and the sights filed off; and Timkins wasn't used to a cowman's guns. They were old Bill's. Timkins had brought them, knowing that Monroe would have to be killed with a .45 if people were to think old Bill had done it. The gamblers had guessed that they would be able to shoot, jump down the dark stairs, out of the open front door, and away into the night before sleepy people would catch sight of them. Then the story would be told that old Bill and some friend who had helped him get out of the calaboose had come up and killed Monroe.

Perley Price, the fatter of the gamblers, held his gambler's gun—a short nickel-plated affair, good for killing men no farther off than across a card table.

Monroe, with all the bedclothes thrown off so there would not be the slightest weight on his broken hip, had raised himself upon an elbow, forgetful of his pain, and with grim set face glared at Timkins. Monroe could look straight into any man's guns without batting an eye.

As Timkins said, "Yore time's come," Red had lifted up his foot and sent it against the weak latch of the door; and the gamblers, with flinching, startled jerks, wheeled and stepped back, staring in amazement.

"Don't let me interrupt," said Red. "I'm cur'ous too, a heap!"

They were armed, guns were in their hands, he stood right before their eyes, filling the doorway; but they were afraid of him. They knew he was a killer, that he meant to kill them They were gamblers and had cold nerve of a sort, but it wasn't the sort that jumped into a fight at point-blank range not with a man that grinned as he waited for their first flicker of menace.

Red did not move—anything but his lips; and he said tauntingly: "Why don't you tell 'im Hamel put you up to killin' 'im, then meant to make folks think ol' Bill broke jail an' done it?"

They simply stared like frozen men. They trickily wanted some flicker of advantage. They wouldn't, they

simply couldn't, shoot it out gun to gun with a man like Red. They knew he would kill them quicker than they could wink, and that he would shoot at the first twitch of movement. The muzzles of the heavy guns, to which Timkins was unaccustomed, sagged lower and lower. Fattish Perley Price, back of the skinny Timkins and almost behind him, licked his dry mouth as if about to speak, but didn't.

"Why don't you tell 'im," Red added, "how you burnt ol' Bill's feet an' fingers, tryin' to make 'im tell where Mr. Monroe had his money hid—an' ol' Bill wouldn't, not even though Monroe here had turned agin 'im?"

"Hamel put us up to it, an' was there!" said the skinny Timkins. "An' me—I ain't goin' get killed for Hamel's doin's!"

With that he dropped the guns, opened his hands, and let them fall. He, knowing the range, knew that he was safe before Red if he dropped his guns.

"How about you, Fatty?" Red inquired.

Perley Price dropped his gun, too.

"I'm awful sorry it's agin the law for to shoot unarmed men," said Red, but added cheerfully, "Still, it's all right for to hang 'em, so you card stealers won't feel plum neglected! 'Pears like you still must be wearin' yore holdout, Fatty, 'cause you ain't liftin' yore hands much now, neither!"

Perley Price put up his hands shoulder high.

"Hand me up one o' them guns!" said Monroe. "I ain't got no feelin's against shootin' 'em, unarmed or loaded down with cannons!"

"Nope," said Red. "You see, Mr. Monroe——" He turned his head in a quick glance toward Monroe, and as if that one look aside were a signal, Timkins, with flip of hand, jerked at his own nickel-plated affair that he wore in a spring holster under his coat and at the same instant, Perley Price, with down-drop and scrambling outreach of hand and scrambling back movement of body, so as to get into the shelter of the bed, grabbed at his gun.

Timkins, by long practice of nervous card-trained fin-

gers, was quick as a flash. As he drew he jumped sideways, and though his gun went off the noise of it was not heard, for the roar of Red's .45 seemed to gobble up the very sound of the smaller gun which pitched its bullet at the ceiling. But Timkins went down with lead in his heart and his evil face set in a noiseless gasp.

With the flick of thumb Red also shot almost simultaneously with his second gun. Natural gifts and long training made him use his guns almost as effortlessly, as instinctively, as he used his fingers; but as the hammer was falling he was stabbed with fear and jerked his hand, sending the shot wild.

The crippled Monroe, with a heave of his body and a kick of his uninjured leg, had thrown himself right out of the bed on top of the gambler who, crouching knees down, had scrambled into shelter, meaning to shoot at Red from behind cover.

Red, by an almost clairvoyant sense such as gunmen seem to have, had shot at where he *knew* the gambler's head was. Probably too quick for thought he had seen from the corner of his eyes that the gambler's head was there; and he had shot even as he looked more directly —and as he looked the hammer was falling. And it was no longer the gambler's head, but Monroe's back, that he saw.

With no more than the hundredth part of a second to spare, Red acted. The bullet struck the floor. Red jumped forward with gun held to strike the gambler's head, but there was nothing to be seen of it.

Monroe was on him. Tugging, jerking, their bodies swayed. There was the snarl of quick hot breathing, broken curses from the gambler. A kind of thin smoke rose from the dusty floor. Monroe was practically helpless from the hips down. The gambler bucked and writhed. Their struggling moved the bed. Red hopped about, unable to do anything, and swearing vaguely.

Then there was a muffled report. And another. The bodies sank, Monroe still on top of the gambler, as if both were dead.

Red pulled at Monroe's shoulder, speaking to him anxiously. "Mr. Monroe?"

Monroe, breathing hoarsely, lifted his head. His tone was quiet but the sentence was broken with gasps. "I'm all right—when I get my breath. The doctor said—said I might never ride again—if I didn't keep quiet but—but I had to kill him—with his own gun."

Monroe had got his fingers on the gun and, pressing it against Perley Price's body, had shot, twice.

"Gee gosh!" said Red. "I was scairt you'd been shot, too!"

Monroe raised his head higher, pushed, trying to rise, and with a hand out-groping felt for the bed. "An' would you have cared?" he asked calmly. "You know, don't you, I offered a reward for your head?"

"Hell, me, I don't care how many rewards is offered f'r my head—'long as nobody collects. An' fact is, this is an awful mix-up, Mr. Monroe, but I ain't done nothin' much wrong. Jus' let me help you get into bed an' I'll——"

Red, hearing steps, wheeled with gun set. A tall angular form filled the doorway. The man there, showing no interest at all in Red's gun, said in slow, solemn voice, " 'Pears like allus I manage to come too slow f'r the show."

"For the love o' Pete's grandmother's great half uncle, Buck! Where'd you come from?"

Old Buck Waxman straightened up a little, and stepped in, looking down at Monroe.

"Miz Morgan," said Buck, "she sent word out to me as how hell it had shore busted loose here in town, so me, I come to help this fool kid here face the music."

Monroe, in great pain, angered, mystified, and still struggling to rise on his one good leg, demanded savagely, "What the hell have you been up to? Damn dirty work it looks like, an' crooked, too! I want to know!"

Red put away his guns and helped Monroe, saying, "It may not be all right, what me an' Buck have got into, but there ain't no dirty work about it! You jus' set down here an' listen!"

But before Buck could get started to talking the hotel's four or five lodgers, together with Mrs. Wyman, having been aroused by the shots, came crowding into the hall. Their eyes were popping; their tongues buzzed with questions. Mrs. Wyman caught sight of Buck Waxman and almost squawked, "Whatever's happened, it's all right. Buck, he's here!"

Buck sidled off awkwardly, mumbling, "It was awright 'fore I got here, Miz Wyman. Red, he an' Monroe they've sent them gamblers to the happy huntin' ground!"

"Happy huntin' hell!" said Red. "They're a foot deep under grease in the devil's skillet. An' listen. All you folks crowd in here an' listen to what me an' Buck's got to say to Mr. Monroe."

"Can't you tell it private?" said Monroe.

"No sir. You went an' made it gosh-darn public that me an' Buck had rigged a flim-flam game on you, so folks has got a right to know. I ain't much good as a liar. I ain't been much o' one, neither! I come to town lookin' for work. Et supper an' walked down to the Cross Bar Saloon, where I met Buck here comin' out. We stood an' talked about nothin' in pertickular, then I went in. Them gamblers—'r rather these here gamblers"—Red swept a hand at the bodies—"was trimmin' a red-headed boy of about my own size an' age. From certain symptoms, me, I suspicioned they was usin' a holdout. So I cut in an' said, 'Hands up!' Them gamblers give the kid back his money. Then me an' Buck come up here to the hotel, an' talked some more, then Buck he went to bed in the nex' room. Then that redheaded kid, he follered me up to my room here an' says he's a heap grateful an' f'r me to look out because them gamblers an' Hamel was layin' to plug me. I ask the kid his name an' he says for to call 'im Smith. I spot that as a hair brand of a name, the which I mentions. Then he up an' says he'll tell me somethin'. He says his name is Jerome Douglas, but——"

"What's that?" Monroe shouted.

"You lay still an' listen. You're goin' hear it all, Mr.

Monroe! He says his mother's dead an' the cow outht where he's been raised up in Colorado has been sold. He says some time ago he got him a letter, the which is shore cur'ous. It sorta says, 'You don't know nothin' about who you are or yore dad, but I know all about you. An' I think maybe I can do somethin' nice for the family. You come down here to Tajola, sorta give out that yore name is Frank Peters, loaf around a day 'r two, and I'll look you up.'

"Well, the kid he come, but he sorta got cold feet about givin' out that his name it was Peters. He wants to look around some first, so he says his name is Smith.

"While I'm settin' there readin' the letter, Shorty Crawley he comes knockin' at my door for to tell me Buck here has been hurt down to the Stage barn an' wants for to see me. Buck, he's snorin' there in the next room, so I know why they wanta see me down to the barn. I leaves the kid to ride herd on Crawley, an' I go. I go the back way an' sneak in', set an' listen. Then a feller he comes runnin' down to the barn to say they've shot *me* with a rifle through the winder o' my room. I know right off it's the kid they've shot, an' that makes me hot under the collar so I wade in an' talk to 'em! Well, sir, when the smoke's clearin' away, there's Mr. Monroe here, ridin' in, slow an' calm.

"He talks some an' asks me my name. An' all of a sudden I gets the fool notion that the kid bein' dead maybe I oughta take that name o' Frank Peters just for to see what was goin' happen to 'im. So I does."

"When I git back up here to the hotel an' tell Buck what all has happened he sorta wiggles uncomfortable, tells me that there boy is Mr. Monroe's son an' that he, Buck, had meant to get the kid down here, put him to work on the Zee Zee, let Mr. Monroe sorta get to like 'im, an' maybe take quite some fancy to 'im. Buck, he says Mr. Monroe's awful touchy about folks meddlin' with his personal affairs thatway. An' besides he wants the kid took care of, right, so he lights out an' tells Miz Morgan to come in here an' git the boy.

"Well, sir, when she comes, she is drove in by a feller

named Harry Stow, who's knowed me since I was wearin' diapers. An' sorta unintentional he tells folks my name is Red Clark. Mr. Monroe somehow musta got hold o' that letter Buck had wrote the kid tellin' him to come down here as Frank Peters, so he up an' suspicioned me as an impostacator an' wanted my hide for to nail on his barn door. That there is all truth. Ever' word of it—exceptin' that I've left out a lot, the which is that Hamel is an ornery skunk of a man who's been lyin' to you, Mr. Monroe, an' stealin' from you, an' pullin' the wool over yore eyes, for twenty years!

"An' what's more, when he learnt about me not bein' who you thought I was, that give him the bright idea o' havin' you killed so he could run in somebody as yore son an' get the Zee Zee. An' them gamblers come up here to do it!

"Buck's brother, ol' Bill—Mr. Monroe, he didn't know a thing on earth about what me an' Buck here done. You judged him clear wrong. Down there in the calaboose, Hamel an' these here gamblers burnt his fingers an' feet for to make him tell where you keep yore money. An' he wouldn't. I got 'im out. He's downstairs now in the kitchen. An' Shorty Crawley, he's there too—all tied up in a knot an' jus' bustin' for to tell the truth. Some o' you folks go down an' drag 'im up here so Mr. Monroe can listen."

Mrs. Wyman said, "F'r landsakes!" Men made explosive comments in amazement. They stared at Red, they stared at Buck, but looked longest and steadiest at Mr. Monroe. He was a stubborn man, with a sort of iron mask of a face. Pain gnawed at his broken hip. He was angered, and yet in some ways he was not angry. He peered at Red from under drawn eyebrows. He did not doubt Red's story.

Monroe asked slowly, "That was my boy that was bad hurt?"

"Yessir, I reckon so."

"Then you tell the doctor to get out to Morgan's ranch an' stay there till my boy is cured!" said Monroe, letting go of his emotions and speaking as he felt.

"But you need that there doctor yoreself, too!" Mrs. Wyman protested.

"Damn myself. I want that boy took care of!"

CHAPTER XVIII

At Sun-up

Some of the men partly carried and half dragged Shorty Crawley up the stairs into Mr. Monroe's room where, with a good deal of shivering as if half frozen, he sat bound in a chair and talked.

Buck had stayed down in the kitchen to talk with his brother; and there Red found him.

"Listen, Buck. It's purt' near sun-up. You an' me has got some work to do. When Crawley gets through talkin', word o' what he's told'll be all over town. Hamel'll light out. I'm goin' after his scalp."

"He sleeps over to the Cross Bar, upstairs," said Buck, rising from the edge of the bunk where his brother lay.

"He ain't asleep now. Hell! He's waitin' for them gamblers to come back. That's why we gotta git a wiggle on."

Old Bill spoke up from the bunk: "An' you two wanta go slow an' be careful. A lot o' his Cross Bar rustlers are there. He sent f'r 'em jus' in case there was to be some trouble here in town."

"We'll be careful not to waste no bullets, won't we Buck?"

"Unh," said Buck. Just an uninterested grunt. A pause. Then, "Morgan an' his riders are comin' along into town, too. I lit out ahead. He says Monroe 'r no Monroe, he's goin' to clean that Cross Bar outfit off the range."

"Well, le's be goin'!" Red urged. "We don't wanta wait for no help!"

Buck grunted again, then paused before he spoke. "When you've lived to be as old as me, kid, you'll have learned to slow down in yore angerzieties f'r to git into trouble. Go slow an' shoot first. That there is my motter.

Also, have a hoss handy in case you need 'im. You may need 'im to chase the other fellow with. My hoss is wore out. We'll go down to the barn an' git a couple."

"We don't need no horses."

"Hamel's foxy. Supposin' he gets a-hossback, an' goes off, leavin' us to walk?"

"Awright. Have it yore way. But be a-comin'!"

"It's a mir'cle to me," said Buck sadly, speaking partly to his brother, partly to Red, "how kids ever live long enough to get 'emselves some sense. They're allus so hasty-like for to git into trouble. We got plenty o' time."

"We ain't! Hamel's waitin' f'r them gamblers. If they don't show up, he's goin' get nerv'us. She's awmost daylight!"

" 'Tain't," said Buck. "But awright, then. Le's make a start. S'long, Bill."

"S'long, Buck. S'long, son," said Bill. "Have a good time!"

"Well, one thing's shore dead certain," said Red, sticking up a foot. "I ain't goin' die with my boots on." He rubbed at the sole of the foot, adding, "I darned near died awready a couple o' times from havin' 'em off. But shucks, I got no right to whine thataway over steppin' in cactus when I'm talkin' to a man as let 'em burn the hide right off his feet rather'n tell—me, if I'd had a million dollars hid some'eres I'd tell 'em to let my toes alone an' go get it!"

"Yes," said old Bill slowly. "I've seen how easy you give up—me an' Hellbender, we both saw."

Buck spoke up sarcastically. "I thought you was in a hurry for to git some place!"

As they stepped out of the kitchen Red said, "You got on boots. Me, I'm goin' ride down to the barn."

"Awright, you ride right along. Saddle a couple o' good hosses. I'll come along by the time you're ready."

Old Buck was as casual about it, and sounded just about as indifferent, as if they were to saddle a couple of horses to ride out and look for strays. Red climbed into the saddle of the weary horse which had carried Buck and rode off. Over his shoulder in the hazy star-

light he saw the old man coming along at a slow, half-sidling gait, not hurrying in the least.

" 'F I didn't know that ol' gazebo," said Red to himself, "I'd think he wasn't anxious for to entertain hisself by blowin' smoke in folkses' faces."

Red rode into the barn with the bridle reins in his teeth and a gun in each hand. He didn't know what he was likely to meet. It was dark, totally dark, inside the barn's wide doorway. He jerked back his head, pulling on the reins, and the horse stopped. Red waited, expecting a hail from the man on duty. There was not a sound but the faint rattle of a halter rope and the idle stomp of a horse or two.

"Well," Red mused, just the least little bit ashamed, as he poked his guns away, "looks like f'r onct I was actin' scairt all for no good reason. But it's mighty helpful at times to be a little scairt—though you do feel like a fool when 'tain't necessary none!"

He sang out with a loud, "Hey-oh, there! Fetch a light!"

The echo of his voice rang through the barn, but there was no answer.

"Ain't nobody to home, I reckon," he said, and tossed the reins to the ground as he swung off.

He knew just about where to find a lantern and looked up as he scratched a match. The lantern was just above his head. He was reaching up with a lighted match in his hand when a voice from the darkness across the passageway called sharply, "Hands up!"

All in an instant Red flung the match one way and jumped the other, falling to knees and elbow but facing about with a gun out. No shot was fired. Red, all unconsciously and by good luck, had jumped behind the horse; and the lighted match he had thrown fell in the dusty passageway that was littered with straw. The tiny flame nibbled at the loose hay, casting a flickering light, and the fire began to spread with a quick nibble at the dried grass about it.

Red had scarcely hit the ground before he was up. With quick snatch of left hand he cheeked the horse,

pulling its head around, and with the other he leveled his gun across the saddle at a dim figure barely seen by the flickering light.

"Drop them guns an' git to fightin' fire, 'r I'll roast you alive, feller!" said Red. "You dang well know you can't hit me!" he added, half jeering, half in earnest. "An' you know dang well I can hit you! Me, I'm near the door here, so I won't burn to death, but you—come on! Shoot 'r fight fire!"

A moment's hesitation, a sullen oath, then the soft thud of something falling, and the figure that had become slightly more distinct with the fire's widening circle stepped out with hands up.

The man wore only one holster.

"Awright, git busy stompin' an' kickin' dirt on the fire. Use yore hat. Act like you was an Injun doin' a war dance. Hustle. Jump up an' down. Use yore hat, I tol' you!'

Red stepped out and also scraped dust at the widening circle of tiny flames, but he was barefooted—or the same as barefooted, for his socks were worn through—and the ash was hot. He jumped back, wiping his foot in the cool dust.

"Use yore *hat,* feller, an' don't burn them boots! They look like they might fit me!"

Buck Waxman cautiously poked his head around the barn doorway, took a careful look, and stepped inside. He asked with melancholic petulance, "Now what yuh up to? Gosh blame, but I can't leave yuh outa my sight a minute but yuh start a ruckus!"

"We got company, Buck. He's doin' an Injun fire dance f'r me. Use yore hat, I tol' you! Light a lantern, will you, Buck? Then you might help 'im put out this here little fire."

Buck saw that this broken circle of tiny flame could easily become serious. He quickly lit a lantern and, snatching a blanket from one of the many saddles there, began to beat the ground.

Red looked on critically and talked.

"You can be real spry for a feller that'd have gray in

his beard—if he had a beard! Me, Buck, I rode in here all loaded for bear with both guns out an' the reins in my teeth, like a picture-book hero. Nary a sound! I set an' listened. All was quiet. I sung out. Nobody spoke. Then I crawled off an' reached for a lantern, an' this hombre he opened his mouth an' scairt the pee-waddin' outa me. Say, you, why didn't you shoot when I jumped?"

The fire was out. The man stood dusty, sweating, and sullen, eyeing Red from under downcast lids.

"I asked you a question," Red insisted. "Why didn't you shoot?"

"Aw, go to hell," said the man sourly.

"Me, I'm cur'ous, that's all."

"You jumped too quick. That's all. I wasn't expectin' it. I thought you'd turn around—"

"An' stand still!" Red interrupted. "You ain't been out West long, you ain't! When you didn't shoot, I knowed I had you licked. What you doin' down here, anyhow?"

"I wanted that thousand dollars Monroe offered. That's all. I figgered out that you was hidin' here in town, an' that before mornin' you'd slip down here after a hoss. All the hosses was brought down here a little after twelve tonight. I jes' thought I'd outguess the other fellers that's up to the Cross Bar drinkin'. When you come in on hossback I couldn't figger it was you. But when you lit that match I jes'—well, I never thought no man could jump that fast!" A pause, then grudgingly, " 'Tain't human!"

Red grinned. "Feller, I got my trainin' as a kid jumpin' bushes where I thought a locust was a rattler. You by happenchanct workin' f'r Hamel?"

"No, I jes' rode in yesterday lookin' f'r work. I seen you ride this mornin', an' I heard the talk. I need money bad, an' I figgered you'd shore come down after a hoss before mornin'. That's all."

"How long you been out West here?"

" 'Bout three year."

"That's two more'n I'd have guessed. My gosh, feller,

I come awful near to pluggin' you! Listen, after this when you pull a gun, use it if the other fellow so much as wrinkles his nose! I'm talkin' for yore own good. An' where's the barn boss?"

"There ain't been none down here. I been here all alone since about midnight."

"Buck, this here gentleman, he needs some money bad. I ain't got none. But see if you can't persuade 'im for to loan me his boots. I'm goin' to saddle up."

Red took another lantern. He looked observantly at the saddles and counted them. From them he judged that there were about six or seven of Hamel's Cross Bar riders in town.

The horse in the nearest stall was the one that had been kept up to bring in others from the pasture. The next horse was Hellbender, standing just where Red had tied him along about noon the day before.

"Hello, you ol' devil!" said Red from the next stall, holding the lantern up, peering at the vicious horse. "I reckon nobody was kind-hearted enough to git 'emselves kicked to death by tryin' to turn you out to pasture. Do you remember me?"

Red slowly put out his hand. Hellbender jerked back. Red leaned over reaching. He touched the horse's cheek, stroked it, talking.

"We're friends, you know. Leastwise I wanta be friends, allus, with anybody that can lick me."

Hellbender with sullen uneasiness let himself be patted. At least he did not snap.

"Shore you remember me. I'm that little red-headed boy as was lucky enough to land in the saddle ever' time you sent 'im kitin'. I made dints in my saddle seat where I lit."

When Red led out Hellbender, Buck was standing there with a pair of boots in his hands and the other man, in his stocking feet, leaned against a post, looking sour.

"Kid, you ain't goin' ride that hoss tonight," Buck said earnestly.

"I am if he'll let me. He's got sense, this horse. He says

to me jus' now, he says, 'Red, you're a nice boy, an' I know there ain't no use tryin' to throw any man as has got ears like yourn. You jus' spread 'em like they was wings an' flap right back into the saddle.' Yessir, that's what he said. Didn't you, Heller?"

As Red talked he was busily saddling; and Hellbender took it, quite as if he had expressed just the sentiments that Red claimed.

While Buck was pulling off his saddle and putting it on the other horse, Red tried on the boots and stamped his feet down into them.

"My feet slosh about like they was a couple o' lone oysters in two soup bowls. But they'll have to do, I reckon—spurs an' all. Did you pay the feller, Buck?"

Buck grunted.

"Hell, you got to pay 'im. I don't want 'im to think I'm a thief. 'Sides, if I was goin' steal boots, I'd get myself a better fit than these."

Red crossed over to where the man's gun had fallen. He picked it up, wiped off the dust, looked at it curiously. It was a gun that broke. Red broke it, dumping the shells into his hand. He eyed them, poking with his forefinger.

"Baby bullets," he said, and flung them into the dust. "Feller, a word of partin'. Here's yore gun. I'm bein' friendly. If you want for to live long enough to have some grandchil'ren round yore knee, get out o' this country. I ain't bein' funny 'r insultin'. I'm tellin' you. You was hatched back East an' it ain't in yore blood. Me an' Buck here'd maybe look as silly in yore home town as you do in ourn. But any man that's as slow to shoot as you, an' carries a .38 in a .45 country—he's just naturally beggin' for to get bunged up!"

With that Red strode off, leading Hellbender out of the barn. Being proud of having delivered his little lecture, he swung into the saddle sort of forgetfully. And Hellbender went into the air. Red, not giving an exhibition now, promptly grabbed the horn, jerked up the horse's head and said things. But after a stiff-leg-

ged caper or two, Hellbender seemed to remember that this man was his master and stood still.

Old Buck rode up close and drawled, sadly and sarcastically, "You tryin' to pull that horn out by the roots 'r somethin', like it was a sore tooth?"

"Say, you listen. If you wanta know how nice it is to have a saddle horn for to hold to, we'll swap horses right here an' now! I rode this here horse onct today, free an' clean. An' I ain't been so dang sore since my dad paddled me f'r sayin' I hadn't been into the sugar bowl when it was stickin' all round my mouth! What we goin' do now? Ride right into the Cross Bar an' make some noise?"

"No, we ain't. I'm goin' in the front way an' you go round back an'—"

"You guessed wrong! It's me as goes in the front way, an' *you* c'n go around back an' set on yore tail till the doin's is done!"

"Now, kid, this here is my show. I got me a little piece I wanta speak to them Cross Bar fellers, so you—"

"I'll march right along in with you and listen."

"An' let Hamel an' them bolt the back way!"

"Men you shoot at first don't bolt much o' any way—'cept head first to hell."

"Awright," said Buck, "we'll toss a coin."

"It'll be yore coin. I'm too near broke f'r to run the risk o' drappin' my four bits here in the road."

Buck fumbled in his pocket, pitched a coin lightly caught it, and asked, "What you take?"

"I allus take heads."

Buck leaned forward, peering in the starlight at his palm. "Tails they win," he said calmly, putting the coin back into his pocket.

"I smell me a shenanigan, you ol' shitepoke, you!" Red then hastily plucked a coin from his pocket, put it into his palm, and bent forward, peering. "You couldn't see whether it was head er tails! You jus' took a quick peek an' flim-flammed me!"

"You goin' a-welch?"

"Was it hones' tails?"

"I think so," said Buck calmly. "Like you said, here in the dark I couldn't see very clear, but I didn't see no head so I jedged it mus' be tails."

"Awright, then, I'll go the back way if you promise for to wait till I get up clost enough for to hear yore little speech."

"Then now listen. You git off an' leave yore hoss down the alley a couple hundred feet, then you stay there near the back way. Some o' them fellers may break through. 'F they do, they'll make a bee line down here to the corral for hosses. We'll jus hop in the saddle an' catch 'em. She's goin' start for to git light in about twenty minutes 'r less. Now go slow an' limber, I'm to make my little speech first!"

CHAPTER XIX

The Fight at the Cross Bar

In the Cross Bar Saloon a half-dozen men who were tired, a little drunk, and irritable, hung about the bar, fiddle-faddled with cards, or half dozed. They had been under a strain, waiting up all night, expecting something to happen. Hamel had told them big medicine was being made. He had said Monroe was bad hurt, might not live, and if he died—why, then, a lot o' things would happen. They understood clearly enough what he meant, for they weren't honest cowmen. Hamel wouldn't have honest men working for him. And the men who did work for him made so much money that he wasn't satisfied to get it back over his bar and through faro. He had brought in a couple of card sharks. They were hard men, mostly on the dodge, and any one of them would have been hanged if the other cowmen of Tajola had known their tricks.

Now they loafed about wearily. Some tried to talk with Slim the barkeep and pump him a bit, for he was close to Hamel. But Slim was tired, too, close-

mouthed and irritable. They had all talked out every subject they had to talk about.

"Where the hell is Hamel?" said Tom Jugg, a squat fellow with a knife gash on the side of his face. "I bet he's gone up an' gone to sleep!"

"He hauled us a-hoppin' here into town with word that somethin' was goin' to happen—an' it ain't," said Larry Flint, disgusted. "I'd like fer to have laid my eyes on that there Red feller."

"Them that has is mostly sleepin' peaceful," said Slim, spreading out an old newspaper on the bar and leaning forward.

"Where is Hamel? Upstairs?" Jugg repeated.

"Oh, him an' Shane's holdin' a powwow," said Henry Cary. Shane was the Cross Bar foreman.

At that moment Blinky Thomas came hurrying in with jangle of spurs.

"Where's Hamel?" he called. "Where's Hamel?"

"What's bit you?" asked Jugg.

"Where's Hamel, Slim? Where is he?" Blinky's voice was high-pitched.

Slim leaned on the newspaper and eyed Blinky. "What's all yore rush?"

"He sent me down to the calaboose for to see about Bill Waxman—an' he's gone! Him an' Crawley, too! Gone!"

Men stirred at that, shifting about alertly, looked questioningly at Slim.

"He's upstairs with Shane. You'd better go along up an' tell 'im!" said Slim.

Blinky, important at carrying news, trotted through the saloon and up the back stairs. The jangle and creak of spurs and boots were heard, and Shane opened the door before Blinky reached it.

Shane was thin, muscular, dark, tricky, but no coward. He and Hamel were not exactly drunk, but pretty well loaded from much drinking as they joyfully planned how to take full advantage of their good luck.

"What's all yore rush?" Shane asked as Blinky stopped before him.

"Waxman's gone! An' Crawley, too!"

"Gone!" said Shane.

"Gone!" Hamel echoed, coming forward with head outthrust as if by sticking his ears forward he could hear the quicker.

"Gone!" said Blinky.

Shane and Hamel stared, each at the other. Hamel pulled at his fat jaw nervously. Shane's fingers twitched at the handle of a gun, then with sudden thought he looked at his watch.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "It's mornin'!" He turned toward the window. The first gray misty light of the coming dawn vaguely brightened the earth. "We been settin' here drinkin' and forgettin'——"

Hamel swore, deep-throated, furious. "Them gamblers, they put it over on us! They killed Monroe, then made off with ol' Bill. An' Crawley's throwed in with 'em! They've lit out for the ranch to git that money Monroe's got hid! We been jigger-rooed!"

"Shhh!" said Shane, pushing Blinky aside, and stepping into the hall. "Don't I hear—downstairs—listen!"

Old Buck Waxman, just as calmly as if he were coming in to have a couple of drinks, had stepped through the wide-opened doors of the Cross Bar. The first flush of morning was lightly touching the eastern sandhills. The cool freshness of dawn was in the air. Lamps were still burning in the saloon.

Old Buck with slope-shouldered, sidling gait came in and twiddled the ends of his drooping mustache with thumb and forefinger of his left hand as he glanced about. Then his hand fell and he stood still and eyed the men one after another with a half-mournful gaze.

They had stiffened alertly, sidling this way and that, letting their hands fall. They knew Buck was bad medicine, but their eyes shifted uneasily past him toward the vague darkness beyond the doorway. They could not believe that he had walked in on them alone.

"Howdy," said Buck.

A voice or two answered with inarticulate grunts.

Slim, with a very idle sort of movement, had reached for the long stick and was quietly lifting it toward the ceiling, ready to tap a signal overhead.

"'F I was you, Slim, I'd set that pole back down," said Buck in a low drawl, with no excitement, not even much earnestness in his tone. The tip of his thumbs hung at the edge of his belt. Other men thumbed their belts, and some with palms turned backwards and arms low, waited.

"When I git ready!" said Slim.

"Well, yuh are ready, right now, ain't yuh?" Buck asked it with a sort of pleading mildness, but there was no more than the corner of his eye on Slim. In fact his eyes looked rather blank as if he were not looking at anybody in particular, which meant that he was watching every man there.

Slim put down the pole.

"I been moseyin' 'round on the range some the last month 'r two," said Buck, just about as if speaking to himself. "An' me, I find that quite a considerable number o' cows has been trailed over the back country 'cross Lost Canyon an'——"

"Say, what the hell 're you gittin' at?" Jugg shouted.

"Me? Oh, I jes' thought maybe you boys u'd be inter-rested for to know that the Mexican buyer o' them cows held out two dollars a head on you an' give it to Hamel sorta secret-like as his rake-off!"

"Why, damn his lousy soul!" said Larry Flint. "I suspicioned Hamel——"

"Steady there, steady!" said Slim. "Don't yuh see he's up to tricks!"

"All the tricks I'm up to," said Buck slowly, "is for to make Monroe know what Hamel's doin' an' been doin' all these years. You boys c'n back 'im up if you want. I had a talk with that Mexican buyer some days back, an' he told me things. But his evidence, it ain't no good, seein' how as for one thing he is a Mexican, an' for another he is dead! Most o' what I want in this here world is for Monroe to know that Hamel is a dirty, lyin', sneakin' rustler an' an all-around thief. I

didn't come here alone to make my little speech. This here dump is surrounded, plentiful. So you boys c'n take yore choice. Stick up f'r Hamel an' maybe most likely git bad hurt, 'r agree to tell Monroe the truth, then so-journ f'r a spell in the penitentiary."

Having said his little piece, Buck waited as mildly blissful and contented as a man with four aces watching other folks fingering their chips to raise the pot. He had them more than halfway bluffed. With anxious peering through the dim doorway they seemed to see shadow shapes, with drawn guns, waiting for a signal. They just couldn't believe that he had walked in on them alone —one man facing six, with Slim making an evil seventh. The very audacity of Buck's coming carried conviction.

Some men glanced backwards to the rear of the saloon, half expecting to see Buck's friends there. Fingers twitched toward gun-handles and fell away. Half-furtive, questioning glances went from face to face, each man hopeful to see what the next felt like doing.

"We're covered, boys, an' ain't got a chance!" said a husky voice, and the man raised his hands.

"That there's sensible," said Buck, just as calmly as the man with four aces might watch a fellow with two pair throw away his hand. "Now who's going to be next?"

Men hesitated nervously. Buck had got them in the chill gray dawn. Much whisky, idly drunk through the long night, had lost its nip and sort of soured in their stomachs. Earlier in the night their hands would have leaped gunward and contemptuous curses crackled on their lips. But now he had caught them at the low ebb. He had poisoned their fighting spirit by telling of how Hamel had double-crossed them with his secret rake-off. Another man half lifted his hands, hesitating, not quite sure whether or not to put them up.

"By God," said Jugg, "me, I don't know about goin' to the pen—again."

At that moment there was the thump, thump, thump of quick boot heels on the stairs, the long-legged scrape

of spurs, and as he came from out the shadows of the saloon's rear, Shane shouted, "What the hell?"

And answering him, Slim yelled, "He's runnin' a blazer!" at the same instant ducking low behind the bar. There with hasty reach he grabbed a rifle and jabbed it toward the knot hole, carefully left for just such emergency. Shane unhesitatingly shot. Also the rifle boomed with belch of smoke. Men shouted vaguely, swearing as they went into action. And they learned why old Buck Waxman dared to run his blazer, almost lone-handed—quite lone-handed in fact, for Red in the misty darkness of the alley, had for a minute or two mistaken the restaurant next door for the back of the Cross Bar Saloon.

Waxman's hands flicked at his guns. They were out and going, hip low, as quickly as a snake strikes. His thumbs waggled at the hammers of his triggerless guns. A sort of pounding roar, with now and then the bigger boom of the .38-40 that, almostly blindly, was poked through the knot hole, filled the barn-like saloon. Echoes rattled the very glasses on the shelf back of the bar. A dozen guns were blazing and smoke, fog thick, spun about men that shot half blindly. Some man with upward sweep of gun barrel knocked out the nearest lamp, then splashed forward with long leap, face first, to the floor. Tom Jugg, with one arm broke, went belly down to peer beneath the smoke, and a bullet took him almost squarely through the tip-top crown of his hat. A bullet crashed through the pine boarding under the bar and the .38-.40 ceased firing while Slim, with a face full of splinters and a bullet near the top of his breast, coughed and writhed, clutching wildly at his neck. Wild shots smashed into the bottles and glass behind the bar, adding the clatter of falling glassware to the racket.

Men cursed wildly, some dying, some trying to run with lead in their bellies. Tables were thrown over in the panic, and there was the stumble and thump of men who dropped, badly hurt. Shane's voice rose loud in

anger, bullets splattered about Buck like pebbles thrown by the handful.

There was slackening of gunfire as this man and that went out of the fight, but a thickening of smoke.

Old Buck, hit through the shoulder, backed to the wall. Struck in the leg, he leaned more heavily on the boarding. Hit through the breast, he threw back his head, yet his wiry thumbs snapped at the hammers until they clicked, empty. Then, face down, he fell and with scrambling claw-like groping dragged himself to where Tom Jugg lay dead. With Jugg's guns, Buck went on shooting.

At the first burst of shooting Red had jumped for the back door of the Cross Bar, slammed it wide open and slid through. He paused, peering into the smoke haze blotted by the vague shapes of men up near the bar. The winking lash of gunfire popped like scattered firecrackers. In a half-second's peering he made out old Buck by the flame of his guns. They were the only guns that were shooting toward the back of the saloon. Red cut loose, right and left, then a bullet that seemed to come from the ceiling fairly singed his hair. He spun about with the quick scramble of a cat on a slate roof, and before his feet had paused in their motion he had shot once, then again, at a dim figure above him that leaned with leveled gun across the stair's railing. And Blinky Thomas crumpled up and came bumping down the steep stairs, rolling over and over and over like a drunken man.

Red, peering overhead, thought he saw another shape, but wasn't sure. He did not want to waste a bullet at a shadow. He waited watchfully through a long second or two, then he heard Shane's angry shout, turned, running forward, shooting as he went. For a moment or two guns seemed going off in every direction. The second light had been shot out, and smoke filled the big, almost windowless saloon. Dawn had come, but the dimness of a dark twilight was upon them. The shooting slackened off. Nearly every man was dead or badly hit. Groans and curses mingled, and there was the scrape

of spur and boot as some man who couldn't stand dragged himself aimlessly, not knowing which way to go but trying to escape. Then two guns went off almost simultaneously and nearly point-blank to each other.

A heavy thud followed. The shooting had stopped.

Red stood tense and peering. It seemed to him that he waited through a long half-hour, though he knew that it was probably a full minute at most.

He called, "Hi, Buck?" No answer. Only the vague groans and mumblings of curses. The crippled man had stopped his crawling. He had come to a wall, and lay there. Red shifted on tiptoes just in case some man with a gun was trying to place him by the sound of his voice, and called again, "Buck?"

No answer. Even the groaning men were losing their voices. Stillness, like a presence, seemed to be coming into the saloon. The smoke sifted about, and with wisp-like wavering showed the clear light of early morning through the wide-open front doorway.

"Buck! Buck, are you hurt?"

No answer. Red swore vaguely. What he meant was a kind of prayer. After the terrific reverberant roar of many guns the silence was oppressive. And he who had camped alone for weeks, not missing companionship, now felt suddenly alone, and lonely. He stood in the midst of dead and dying men; and fear told him that Buck was among them.

"Buck! Damn it, Buck!"

No answer. The smoke swirled in a cloudy draft through the doorways, both of which were wide open. And as it lifted from near the floor, drifting up and out, Red stirred, bending to peer at this body and that, searching for what he hoped he would not find.

Near the bar he found Buck, face down, with arm half out and gun still in his hand. Almost head to head with him lay Shane, the Cross Bar foreman. With their last shots each had killed the other.

Red dropped to his knees, tugging at Buck, pulling him over, hoping for life. There was none. He stared into the wrinkled, sad gray face and brokenly cursed

the men that lay dead, all about. The lot of them were not worth Buck's little finger.

With a kind of sense of waking up, Red became aware that people were about the door, and there was a vague soft staccato drumming in his ears. He looked up, listening. Horses, coming on the run, coming fast, with clatter of hoofs.

Red turned, still knees down and with drawn gun, faced the doorway where townspeople had begun to swarm as flies come to dead meat. He was angered to the point of downright madness, and words rippled over his lips with the sound of curses.

"Stand back out o' here, you yellow dogs! If you'd had the grit of a sick pup you'd've cleaned Hamel an' his gang out o' here long ago. An you, you lousy sheriff, if you think you still want me, go up to Monroe an' ask him! An' you long-tailed judge, you—get to hell where I can't see you! It took a man to do the work you—the lot o' you—ought to a-done with a rope long ago! An' they killed 'im!"

Red's voice rang with the truth of what he said, and men flinched. Storekeepers turned their eyes in accusing stares at the bleary-eyed sheriff and muttered so the judge could overhear.

The pounding of horsemen who came at a furious gallop was in the street, before the saloon, and there stopped with abrupt stiff-legged skittering. Over the heads of the crowd in the doorway Red caught a blurred glimpse of men in saddles. He heard their sharp quick questions. Then with heavy stride the horsemen pushed the crowd aside and pressed in behind a tall gray man who stopped short with a backward jerk of his body as he saw that Red held, though did not raise, a gun.

"Who the hell are you?" Red snapped.

"Morgan!"

Red stood up, thrust the gun away, and pointed down. "You've been a long time gettin' here. There he is—he done it all himself!"

Morgan came forward, looked down into old Buck's upturned face, pulled off his hat, then turned slowly,

gazing at the dead strewn about on the saloon floor. Morgan's men with uncovered heads stared about, and muttered in astonishment.

"All of 'em—lone-handed?"

"There's one out back there some'eres that I dropped. The rest are his. There's no other man alive that'd a walked in on 'em like he done! He made me go the back way. Said they might bolt. Bolt hell!"

"We rode to the Cross Bar ranch," said Morgan. "There we learned near ever'body was here in town. So we come, knowin' something was up." Morgan moved his hand, indicating the bodies, and asked, "Is Hamel one of 'em?"

"He'd better be 'r I'll chase 'im from here to Chiner to choke 'im with lead!"

Morgan's riders moved about, looking from one dead man to another. Two were still alive, but both were unconscious.

"You," said Morgan, peering hard—"are the Clark boy?"

"Yes."

"I know about everything. Buck told me."

"Yes, we used the same blanket, me an' him, lots o' times. He was a man."

"Mr. Morgan," said a rangy, bow-legged, sun-blackened young fellow, speaking sort of reluctantly, "Hamel he don't appear to be here, an' that's a fact!"

"Then find 'im!" said Morgan. "Scatter an' find im!"

"Holy gosh," said Red wearily, taking a deep sigh as he shifted his belt, settled the holsters, "now I got to stay down in this damn country till that skunk's buried!"

He began prodding out empty shells and reloading, and talked. "That's jus' what Buck was afraid of, too. Why, he made me get horses, an' come by the back way while him, he walked right in here. I can't imagine what made him do it 'cause he wasn't no fool." Red glanced down toward the old gray wrinkled face, and with slow shake of head, said, "God, but I feel lonesome!"

Then there was a clattering bustle near the rear of

the saloon, vague jubilant cries, and a high-pitched voice sang out, "They got 'im! They got 'im! Here's Hamel!"

There was a surge of the crowd. Townsmen and cowpunchers milled about Hamel as he was dragged along with a man at each arm. A buzzing babel of questions went up. Hamel was coatless, bareheaded, looked still half dazed, and was bleeding from a scalp gash along the side of his head. His holster was empty. His clothes were covered with dirt. The heavy fat jaws quivered, trembling. His little close-set dark eyes bulged in a dazed stare. He mumbled with dry mouth and husky voice, "I ain't done nothin'—nothin'! Whisky."

He was shoved up in front of Morgan and men stepped back, leaving a narrow circle. He was a pitiful thing, Hamel, but there was no pity in the eyes of any man. The rangy, bow-legged, sun-blackened young puncher pushed forward and held out a gun, butt first, to Morgan, saying, "This here's his gun, Mr. Morgan. We found it there in the alley. It ain't even been fired—onct!"

Sneers ran over the lips of the crowd. Hamel was down now, and doomed. The townsmen who had toadied or stood aloof fearing him now showed true feelings, scornfully. His men had stood and fought it out, and died; but Hamel, with gun unfired, had run. He was yellow to the heart's core, and whimpered in Morgan's face, saying, "We allus been friends, ain't we, Mr. Morgan?"

Morgan ignored him. He looked toward his young sun-blackened puncher and asked quietly, "What happened, Joe? Where'd you find 'im?"

"Well, yuh see, Mr. Morgan, he was jus' a-layin' out there in the alley. The boys, they thought at first he was dead, but 'pears like from what we can guess that Hamel here musta snuck out the back way for to bolt, an' seen that there hoss out there an' climbed 'im—'r tried to. That there hoss, Hellbender. I reckon it was sorta dark an' Hamel, he didn't notice very careful that he was about to git astraddle o' some dynamite wrapped round with horsehide."

And Red muttered almost inaudibly, "Buck, ol' man,

you made me bring that hoss!" Then in musing silence he added, feeling sort of relieved and happy, "An' I reckon right now you're leanin' over heaven's rail, a-grinnin' at Hamel!"

"I wanta see Monroe!" said Hamel, gasping, and with a pop-eyed pleading look into Morgan's hard-set face. "I'm sick. I been bad hurt, internal. An' men've lied 'bout me to Monroe!"

Red spoke up, feeling dry-mouthed, but angry. "Mr. Morgan, take 'im up to Mr. Monroe, won't you? Ol' Bill's up there, with his feet an' fingers burnt—an' Hamel done it. Shorty Crawley's up there—havin' blabbed all he knows. Them gamblers is up there, dead. An' Monroe knows why they come. Hamel here, he sent 'em. Take 'im up!"

At that Hamel turned and bucked the crowd, struggling to get through, to get away. He gasped, he howled, he begged. He struggled, weak-kneed, letting himself fall, and being held up by the men that seized upon him. One moment blasphemy swept across his tongue, the next he was mumbling a frantic prayer.

Disgust, like an expression of pain, came onto the faces of men. They were used to seeing even blackguards take it like men. Hamel the bully showed himself rotten clean through.

Men dragged him stumblingly along, out of the door, into the street, and with surging steps that sent up dust yanked him along. The crowd went, too, with much running this way and that, some going on ahead to be among the first up to the hotel, others milling about to get a better look at Hamel. Red felt a tug at his arm, and heard a voice ask, "Ain't you comin'?"

"No, I ain't comin'!" he said, answering before he saw who had spoken. Then he looked into the face of the man named Martin who owned the General Store where Red had bought all of his finery and unfortunately met with Harry Stow.

"Say you"—Red's hand shot out, clutching Martin's arm—"I want my ol' duds back. Boots—where'd you

put 'em?" Then with ideas crowding fast, "Is it you that handles the mail?"

Martin, startled, tried to draw away. He thought Red must be a little out of his head. "No, it's Bob, my clerk."

"Where is that clerk o' yourn?"

"Here in the crowd somewheres."

"Listen, I am goin' up there, too. You an me. An' find that clerk!"

CHAPTER XX

Toward the Cottonwood

EVERYBODY in town tried to crowd into the room where Monroe lay, or into the hall, or on the stairs. All were orderly; for the most part silent, speaking in whispers, waiting.

The crowd willingly, but with difficulty, made way for Morgan as he pushed his way up the stairs, followed by those who were bringing Hamel. At a word, his men stopped with Hamel outside of Monroe's room.

Morgan went in, men giving way before him. He stood at the side of the bed, looked into Monroe's uplifted face, then in silence put out his hand.

Monroe, leaning on an elbow, in silence, took it.

Years and years before they had been friends. Now, with no word spoken, but with much mutual understanding, they had become friends again.

Morgan looked about. He spoke, quietly but with meaning. "Get out, ever'body."

Men stirred, shifting their feet, edging toward the door, going backwards.

"Take him along!" said Morgan, pointing toward Shorty Crawley, still tied, hands and feet.

Crawley was pulled out, carried. Then Morgan closed the door. He and Monroe were alone.

Morgan cleared his throat, but said nothing. Monroe coughed. They looked at each other.

"Yore boy's out to my place," said Morgan. "He stood the ride fine."

"I want me a buckboard fixed up with a mattress on some hay. I'm goin' out to see 'im. Be a long time 'fore I can set a saddle again. Maybe never."

"Miz Morgan an' Margie an' me'll be a heap glad for to have you visitin' us again, Jerry."

"I'll sure be glad to be there again, Oliver."

Morgan cleared his throat some more, fumbled with his belt buckle, pulled at the collar of his shirt, and wiped his face with his neckerchief. He swallowed two or three times, coughed again, then managed to say, "We got Hamel outside here. I thought maybe you'd like to ask 'im a little somethin'."

Monroe, too, swallowed two or three times, stared blankly at the window, and shook his head.

"No. My boy's come back to me. I ain't goin' insult men like them Waxman boys by even listenin' to Hamel admit he lied about Diamond Jack O'Brien. As for her—Oliver, I hope I roast in hell a long, long time for the way I treated her."

Oliver Morgan put out his hand again. Monroe took it. The handshake was long and firm, with no word spoken.

Then Morgan put on his hat, stepped back, and turned toward the door. "I'll be along back in about a half-hour, Jerry. It won't take long."

"An' see that my door is kept closed, Oliver. I don't want to see nobody for a spell."

Morgan stepped outside, closing the door behind him. Men, holding their breath, searched his face expectantly. He paused, looked about, then spoke in a calm low voice to his rangy young puncher. "All right, Joe. Get on with what's got to be done."

"Yessir, Mr. Morgan."

"Everybody clear out. Plum out o' the hall. Go along!"

Low words were passed, reaching the people on the stairs and at the foot of the stairs; and the crowd gave way and moved out of the hotel, swarmed on the porch, and clustered in the street. In silence the men who held him pulled Hamel along.

"Miz Wyman," said Morgan as he passed her at the

foot of the stairs, "Mr. Monroe, he don't want for to see nobody for a spell."

As the crowd thinned on the hotel porch, Red let go of the arm of a thin pimply-faced young man, saying "Scat, you! An' consider yoreself lucky that it wasn't needful for to tell how you monkeyed with other folks' mail."

One of Morgan's punchers came riding up, leading a half-dozen horses. Men mounted and sat motionless, waiting. The crowd stood silent, staring. Hamel's hands were tied behind him. Terror seemed to have struck him dumb and left him now too weak to struggle. He was lifted bodily into a saddle. Men even fitted his feet into the stirrups.

From his own saddle Morgan loosened the lariat, ran it through his hands, fixed a small loop, and with a quick easy toss set it about Hamel's neck. Then Morgan, not looking at anyone, swung into the saddle, let the rope hang loose in his hand and started his horse at a walk. The horse Hamel was on followed at a walk. Behind him rode four other men, at a walk, with hands resting on the horns of their saddles and looking neither to the right nor the left.

They turned left on the main street, going at a walk toward the big cottonwood about a half-mile from town.

CHAPTER XXI

Red Rides On—

LATE that afternoon Red Clark rode out of Tajola, alone. He rode Hellbender, and led his own horse that carried a new blanket roll, tarpaulin, and some camping pans. His saddle bags were stuffed with bacon, beans and flour, coffee and sugar. Plenty of sugar. Old Bill had asked him to stay on. Mr. Monroe had asked him to stay on. Oliver Morgan had said Miz Morgan and Margie both had told him to be sure and give Red a job on his ranch.

But Red shook his head stubbornly, saying little.

"Nope, when I see ol' Buck put away, I'm ridin', I don't wanta stay in this country. Where I'm goin' I don't know."

Monroe had given him money, and confirmed the order on the General Store, sending word that Red was to have whatever he wanted.

Red's first want was his old boots back. After that, now having two horses, he bought a bed roll and tarp.

He was riding out and not paying much attention to the direction in which he was going, when he chanced to look up, and there before him at the bend in the road was Hamel's body, dangling motionless at the end of a rope. Red stared up at the long lumpish form, nodded grimly, then leaned far forward and gently patted the neck of Hellbender.

CHAPTER XXII

—And Finds a Friend

Some months later Red came at a lope through the sagebrush and flung himself off, all sweaty and dusty, at the end of a round-up chuck wagon. Horses were all about and strange men from various outfits.

Somebody hit Red on the back, spun him about, and wrapped an arm about his neck, cussing him affectionately.

"Well, I'll be gosh-darned danged!" Red spluttered jubilantly. "If it ain't Harry Stow! Well, you ol' wall-eyed lizard, you!"

"Yeah," said Stow, backing off and frowning. "You an' me is en'mies f'r life! You shore as hell ruint my life!"

"Nobody could do as much harm to you as you purt' near done to me there in Tajola some time back!"

"That's jus' it. You're gazin' at a broken-down hopeless feller who's all spoiled an' never ain't goin' to be able for to eat hearty again. 'Member that there red-headed kid what got shot through the winder instead o' you?"

" 'Pears like I sorta do," Red admitted.

"Well, sir, he come out to our ranch, got all cured, an' Margie Morgan, she up an' married 'im. The nex' day I took my busted heart in hand an' lit out. Red, you shore as hell let yoreself in for a lot o' disappointment if you work on a ranch where there's a purty girl. From now on, I'm ridin' only f'r bach-lors. But say, I got one satisfaction, shore!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Margie may've married 'im, but she keeps tellin' 'im there ain't nary a man in the whole Tajola county as can hold a candle to the ridin', fightin', good-lookin' ol' Red Clark o' Tulluco. He ain't a-goin' git no overdose o' happiness outa his married life with her havin' affectionate memories o' yore black eye! Yes-sir, I bet her first-borned kid, even if it's a girl, 'll be named Red Clark o' Tulluco!"

Thereupon Red promptly tripped Harry Stow, and they went rolling about in the sagebrush and sand, happy as two bear cubs at play. Red came up on top, put his knees on Harry's arms, pinning him tight, tickled him in the ribs the better to help him wiggle, and sprinkled sand on his mouth to help teach him not to tell lies about folks, particularly pretty girls that had the good sense not to marry him. After which they ate some three pounds apiece of steak and hot biscuits, then curled up in blankets, elbow to elbow, smoked cigarettes, and talked far into the bright starlit night.

THE END

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By Gordon Young

Red Clark of Tulluco had been in Tajola only a few hours when he stuck his six-guns into one of George Hamel's crooked poker games to keep another redheaded cowboy from being fleeced.

Hamel, a tough man to buck, owned half the town and all the lumber needed to build coffins.

After that game an ambush was laid for Red, but he shot his way free only to learn a second trap had caught the other redheaded puncher. That was all Red needed to make him stay in Tajola to fight a deadly conspiracy, and stay he did though it meant hiring out to the hombre known as The Devil in Pants!

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A RED CLARK WESTERN

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